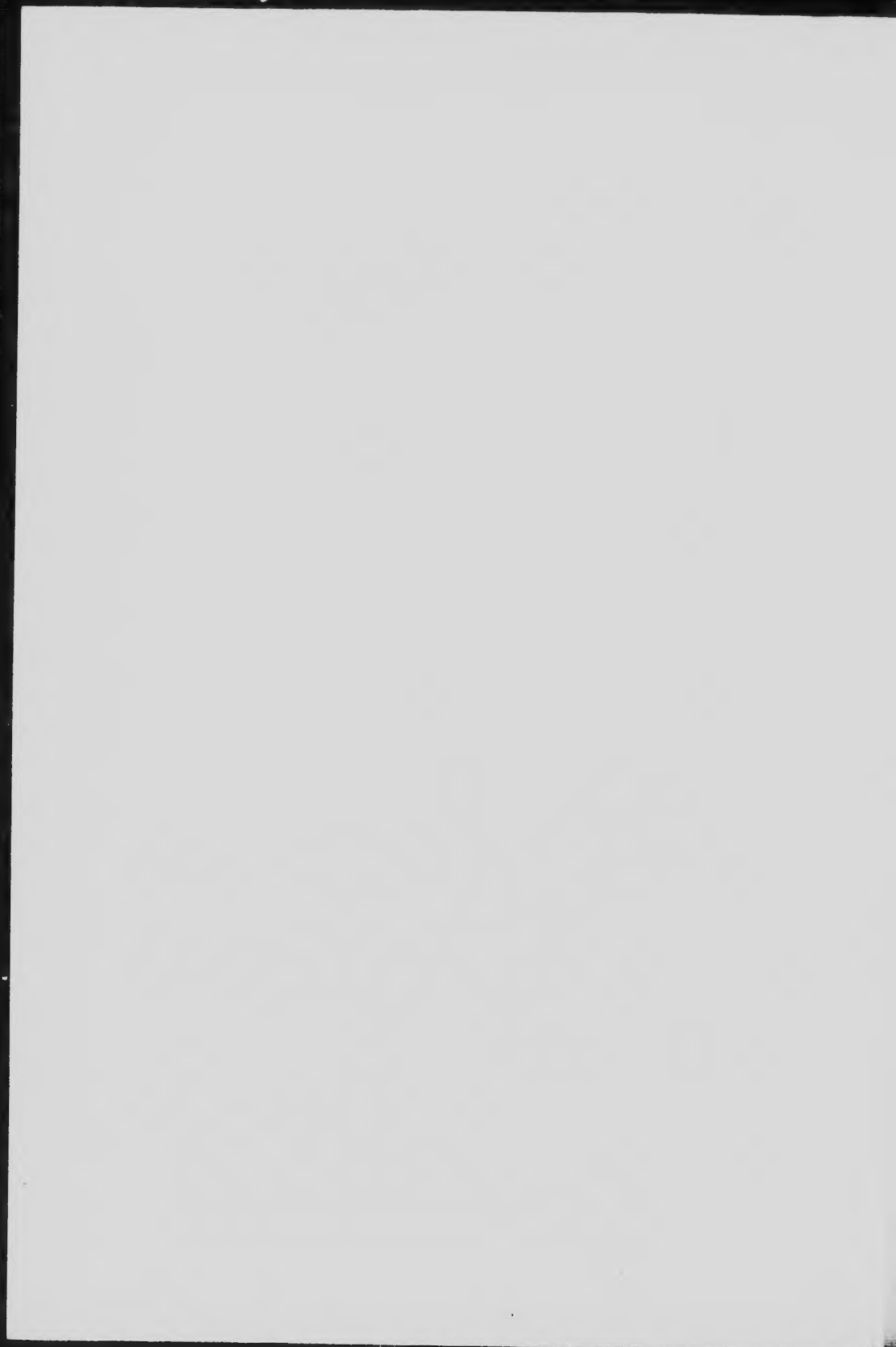


The Quarterbreed



ROBERT AMES BENNET



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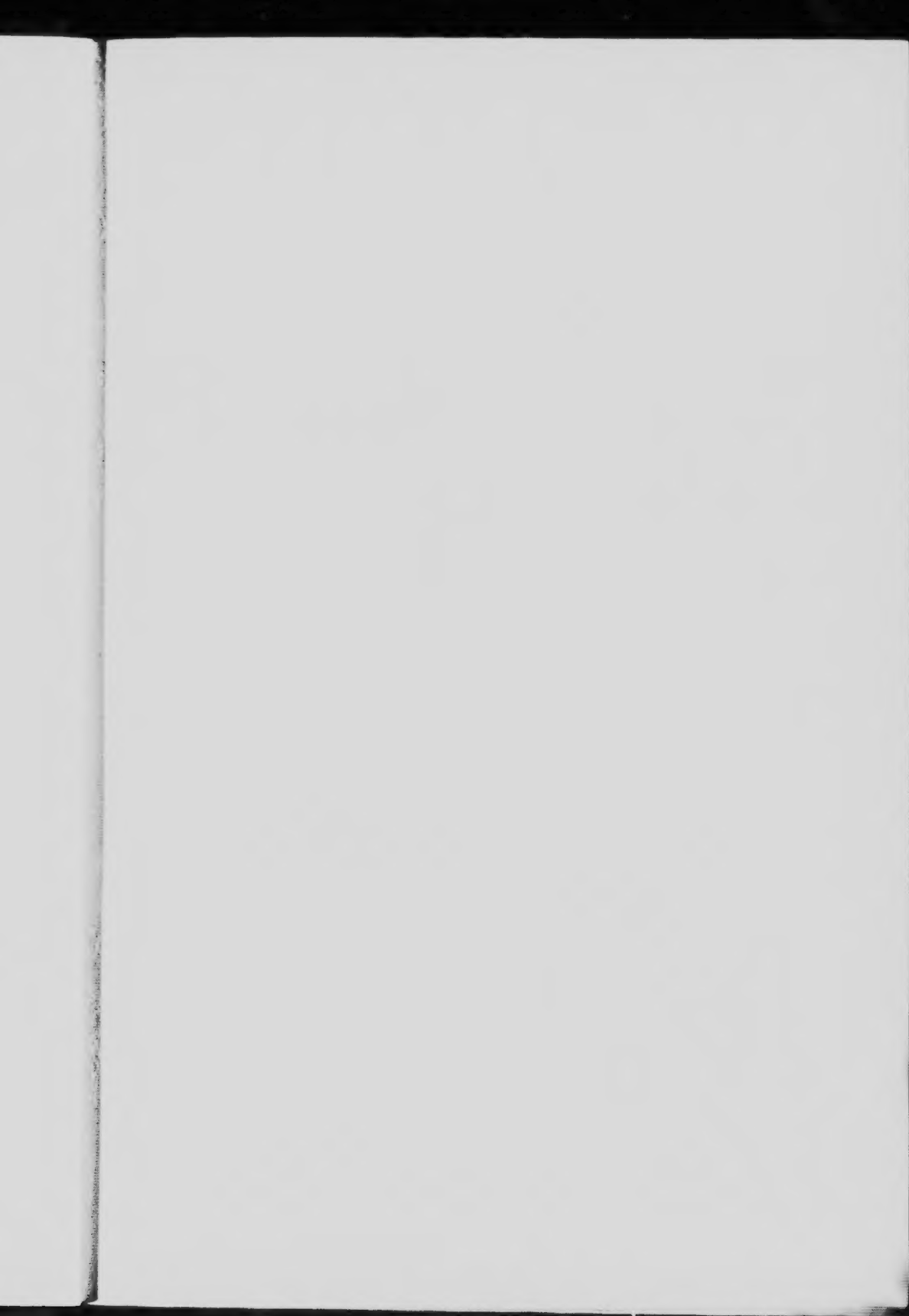
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I*N all the new, young world, you and I are
alone, Marie*

[Chapter vi]

THE QUARTERBREED

BY
ROBERT AMES BENNET

ILLUSTRATED BY THE KINNEYS



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I UNDER FIRE	3
II STRATEGY	12
III THE ACTING AGENT	19
IV CONFIDENCES	28
V A MATTER OF WEIGHT	39
VI SMOKE AND HAZE	50
VII THE FIRST CARD	61
VIII BY-PLAY	75
IX THUNDERBOLT	87
X THE COMMON LAW	100
XI BEST-LAID SCHEMES	116
XII THE COQUETTE	132
XIII AT THE BROKEN MOUNTAIN	144
XIV LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS	157
XV HIS DUTY	168
XVI ANOTHER CARD OR TWO	181
XVII WORD OF HONOR	190
XVIII IN WHITE AND BLACK	201
XIX A LOVER'S PROMISE	211
XX THE FIGHTING CHANCE	223
XXI THE ONLY WOMAN	233
XXII PLEASANT LITTLE SURPRISES	246
XXIII IN SELF-DEFENSE	257
XXIV THE REGISTRATION	271

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXV THE RACE	281
XXVI STARK COURAGE	294
XXVII A WEDDING POSTPONED	308
XXVIII TILTING AT WINDMILLS	320
XXIX CONDEMNED	330
XXX THE SENTENCE	342

PAGE

281

294

308

320

330

342

THE QUARTERBREED

THE QUARTERBREED

CHAPTER I

UNDER FIRE

IN its Spring freshness the usual dreary brown of the Montana range was tempered with a pleasant green that shaded to emerald on the low-lying ground, and the swells and hollows were alike spangled with Spring flowers. But the mid-day sun was blisteringly hot, and the rider had long since wearied of the monotony of the high plains. As his long-limbed mare trotted up the slope of the ridge that lay along the bank of Wolf River, he turned the gaze of his small, clear hazel eyes from the craggy butte on his right to the snowy crests of the Little Paw mountains.

The nearest of the rugged pine-clad spurs were now only four or five miles away. He had almost reached the Reservation. The river marked the boundary. Soon he would be across on Indian ground and covering the last short stretch to the Agency. The rangy stride of his thoroughbred mount was as easy and unfaltering as when she had borne him away from the half-dozen shacks of the nearest "town" on the railroad, fifty miles back over the open range. But as they

began to top the rise, he drew her down to her rapid walk, and took out his field-glasses.

The massive bulk of the butte shut off all sight up the river. On his left he had an angling view of a narrow trough-like valley, or *coulée*, down which the dwindling stream flowed in shallow volume from pool to pool. Across on the distant slope, midway to the foot of the outlying hills, the rider's keen eye noted a herd of grazing cattle. He raised his field-glasses.

Hardly had he focused the powerful little binoculars on the herd when from across the *coulée*, a short distance downstream, came the crack of a high-power rifle. A moment later the shot was followed by three deeper reports from an equal distance upstream. The military bearing of the rider instantly became more pronounced. His hand dropped on the butt of his rifle, but only to loosen the weapon in its saddle sheath. No bullets had come pinging or whirring past him.

The first shot was smokeless. Not so the others. The bluish smoke puffs of their charges of black powder directed the gaze of the rider to the dozen or more swarthy, half-naked forms crouching near the top of the *coulée* bank, across from the butte. He had no need of his glasses to perceive that they were Indians and that he was not the object of their attack. All were warily peering down the *coulée* along the edge of the bank on which they lay outstretched. An-

other crack of the high-power rifle caused the rider to turn his gaze in the same direction.

The road ran obliquely across the narrow valley to a side gulley that gashed the far bank a hundred yards or so downstream. Back in the shelter of this gulley four or five ponies stood grouped before a buckboard. Above them a man was crouched under the edge of the bank. Another man lay behind a small bush, just outside the entrance of the gulley. Each had his rifle pointed in the direction of the Indians.

The rider glanced doubtfully at the larger party and then back to the gulley. A woman in civilized dress was coming around from the rear of the buckboard. The erect figure of the rider tensed with quick decision. He wheeled his mare out of the road, to cut down the sharp slope directly towards the Indians. His voice rang across the coulée with the clearness of a bugle call: "Ho, there! Cease firing!"

Suddenly made aware of the newcomer's approach by his command, the Indians twisted about to glare at him in a half panic. Three or four started to slink away. But one, more fierce or desperate than the others, swung his rifle around and fired. The bullet grazed the rider's coat collar at the side of his neck. His right hand had been replacing the field-glasses in their case. He flung up the empty hand, palm outward. The reply to the peace sign was a second bullet that cut the crown of his campaign hat.

Two bullets were enough to change the tactics of the rider. At a word from him and a touch of the rein, his mare swerved and plunged obliquely down the side of the coulée with the speed of an Irish thoroughbred hunter and the surefootedness of a cow pony. The Indians burst into exultant yells, and several opened fire on the fugitive. Bullets whizzed all about the erect, stern-faced rider as the mare leaped on down to the coulée and dashed across the bottom towards the gulley.

Fortunately all the Indians were pot-hunters, unused to shooting their game on the run. The fugitive was also favored by the great speed of his mare and the diversion caused by the hot fire at the Indians maintained by the two men and the woman in the gulley. Urged on by his voice and spurless heel, the mare sprinted over the sandy level with the rush of a racehorse on the home stretch. Coming to the narrowed stream, she covered it in a single tremendous leap, and dashed on, unchecked, up into the gulley, safe out of reach of those whirring leaden hornets.

As they swept past the low bush at the entrance of the gulley, the rider looked down at the man behind it. He saw a blond, florid young fellow whose blue eyes and small red-lipped mouth were ugly with hate. A glimpse, and he was past the outlier.

The woman, crouched just beyond, under the edge of the bank, was blazing away towards the

Indians with an automatic revolver. She was so intent on her firing that she did not turn her gracefully poised head to glance about at him. He could see only the mass of her black hair and the lower part of her aristocratic profile under the brim of her cowboy hat.

An instant later he was pulling up his mare in the narrow space between the ponies and the side of the gulley. As she came to a stop alongside the buckboard, he patted her quivering neck and looked up with cool alertness at the third member of the party, under the brink of the bank. The man ceased firing and twisted his thickset body half about so that he could stare down at the newcomer. His close-cropped hair was grizzled, his face leathery and stolid. The cast of his features indicated French-Canadian blood.

The fusillade of the Indians had ceased the instant their view of the fugitive was cut off. Yet, after a single hard look, the man on the bank turned away to thrust his rifle up over the edge and shoot. The rider wheeled his mare and rode back past the skittish ponies. The woman had crept in from the entrance of the gulley to where she could stand upright without exposing herself to the fire of the Indians.

She came up the slope with an easy, springing step that told of youthful buoyancy. From under the hem of her neat gingham dress peeped the toes of small, blue-beaded moccasins. Having reloaded her pistol, she raised her head to look up

at the rider. He was lifting his hand to touch his hat with perfunctory courtesy. Then he saw her face — calm, proud, vividly beautiful.

He removed his hat, with a sudden change in his manner that brought a gleam into the girl's blue-black eyes. The glare of the midday sun relentlessly exposed the lines furrowed by suffering in his strong, plain face and the pallor under its tropical tan. From the white hairs that silvered his thick ruddy locks at the temples, his age might have been put at thirty-five or forty. But this sign of middle age was contradicted by his eyes.

A trifle disconcerted by the girl's cool scrutiny, he brusquely demanded: "What is the trouble here?"

"Trouble?" she replied. "What trouble?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss," he said, stiffening under her ironical smile. "I should have inquired if you've had any casualties."

She looked from his cavalry puttees to his army saddle and the butt of his rifle. "I guess you need n't worry about your scalp," she reassured him, her rich contralto voice as soft as it was sweetly mocking. "You came near getting a hair brand, I see. But you're safe enough now if you keep close."

The raillery brought a slight flush into his sallow cheeks. Yet his gaze did not flinch before her look of disdain. He asked another question: "Have they taken the Agency?"

"No. We saw this bunch up the bank. Reggie cut loose at them before *Père* could stop him."

"*Père*? Ah — your father. The other man fired at them first, you say?"

"Can you blame him? He was along when the agent was shot down, last week. You may have heard of the murder."

"Yes. Still it was wrong for him to invite an attack, with a woman in his party."

"Oh, I'm only a quarterbreed, you know," replied the girl with ironical lightness. "Besides, Reggie thought the party was trying to head us off. Don't worry. Charlie Redbear crawled up the road half an hour ago. The chances are we can hold out until he fetches the police." A rifle shot punctuated the remark.

The rider looked over the coulée bank across at the jagged crest of the butte. "If they slip over there," he said, "this position will become untenable."

"How are they going to slip over, with Reggie waiting to slip a bullet into them?" queried the girl. "*Père* is keeping them from circling around the other way. Of course, though, they may have sent a party up the coulée, to sneak across beyond rifle shot and come down to the butte."

"Ah, quite true!" muttered the rider. "If they have done that, this position will certainly be untenable. The butte is the key to the situation."

He looked at the girl, between concern and

swiftly growing admiration of her remarkable beauty. Her eyes were like blue-black diamonds. An almost imperceptible film of old-gold enriched the cream and rose of her cheeks. Her jet-black hair was of French fineness. The curve of her rather large mouth was perfect.

But the red lips were again parting in a disdainful smile. She replied without seeking to conceal her scorn: "If you're afraid they'll take the butte, you might get away by bolting down the coulée. We 'll do what we can to draw their fire."

"You will?" he said, and he again looked up over the gulley edge at the crest of the butte, the corners of his tight lips twitching under the stubby ends of his mustache.

"Hey!" the man on the bank called down to him. "Haven't got a plug in your jeans, have you? I want a chew. This here's mighty dry work."

"No," curtly replied the rider, and he bowed to the girl. "Thank you for your suggestion. I believe I'll follow it. Kindly step aside."

She stood motionless, her eyes glittering with cold contempt of his cowardice. Unchecked by the look, he turned his mare aside to pass around her. At the same time he tightened his grip on the reins. The thoroughbred responded to the signal by stretching out her lean neck and gathering herself together for a sudden dash. Her rider tightened his hat, leaned forward in the saddle, and gave her the word.

The mare leaped away like a startled deer, bolting out of the gulley along the road as if to return the way she had come. But, once clear of the entrance, her rider leaned far over and pulled hard on the right rein. She swerved sharply and raced away down the coulée. The flight was so unexpected, so daring and so swift that the fugitive had been borne a good fifty yards down along the foot of the near slope before the Indians opened fire on him.

The girl had crept forward and crouched in the entrance of the gulley to peer after him.

"The coward!" she cried. "The coward! I hope they get him!"

But before one of the many bullets could find the leaping, receding mark, mare and rider shot out of sight behind a clump of willows. At once the firing ceased.

The blond young man under the bush glanced around at the girl and called jeeringly: "I say, Marie, how's that for a bobtail visit? Took him for a gentleman."

"Gentleman? That's the word," she mocked.

"Conduct becoming an officer and gentleman."

"Officer?" he repeated. "You don't mean to say —"

"Yes," she asserted. "He's an army officer. I could see it sticking out all over him."

The man stared at her in blank amazement, but suddenly bethought himself to roll over and send a bullet pinging up the coulée.

CHAPTER II

STRATEGY

THE girl continued to peer down the river bottom. After several moments mare and rider dashed into view, racing directly across the cou-
lée. Though the Indians at once opened fire, the mare had skimmed over the level and up into a gulley in the far bank before they could get the range.

Hopeful that one or more of the enemy might expose themselves during the excitement, the young man behind the bush had not looked around. As the firing ceased, he called scoffingly: "How about the strategic retreat? Does General Fabius make his getaway without casualties?"

"*Le bon Dieu* be praised! He has escaped," the girl mocked in turn. "We are saved. In a week or ten days he will return to the rescue with three troops of cavalry."

"If those sneaking coyotes have sent a delegation around to climb the butte from the upside, we'll get ours before Charlie can come back with the police," grumbled the young man.

"Yes. Our military expert saw that at once. He said this position would become untenable."

"So he ran, leaving a woman in the lurch — the skunk!"

"Well, he has gone. You'd better be thinking how to get us out of the hole you've got us into," suggested the girl.

"Lord! I felt sure they'd scatter and run for it when I opened up on them. Anyway, all I did was to knock up the dust in front of them. The way they came back at me proves they really were scheming to get us."

"Much you know about it," scoffed the girl. "Just because some of the tribe are feeling ugly is no sign that —"

"How about the murder of Nogen?"

"Well, how? You and Charlie both say there was only the one buck who did the shooting. No; if this bunch had been planning to get us, they'd have been out of sight under the edge of the bank or over on the butte when we first came along."

"Have it your own way — only toss me a bottle of beer, that's a good girl. I'm dry as a fish."

"No beer — all out — not even any Vichy," she replied. "You'll have to take *eau de fontaine*."

"Spring water!" he groaned. "Why couldn't this have happened on our way back?"

"You then might not have been in a condition to shoot straight," the girl thrust at him.

Recklessly he sat up and looked at her, his blue eyes frankly unashamed, his small mouth

curving in a devil-may-care smile under the neat mustache.

"Now, now, Miss Dupont," he jested. "You've seen me half shot, but you've yet to see me shot."

"I shall if you don't get down," she warned. A bullet whizzed close over his head. "There! You came near catching that one. They've spotted your position. Come away!" Her voice quavered with concern for him.

He smiled with a touch of bravado. Two bullets clipped through the bush and thwacked into the sod on either side of him. They proved more convincing than her alarmed entreaty. He flattened himself on the ground and wormed his way towards her along a shallow rain-cut at the edge of the road. Half a dozen bullets snipped off twigs of the bush that had sheltered him.

The girl did not wait for him to reach her. Satisfied as to his safety, she went up the gulley to the buckboard and drew a canteen from the box under the seat. Her father glanced down and saw what she was doing. His face was powdered with dust. He spat and beckoned to her.

"Good! Bring it up. Bullet hit the edge of the bank."

"Not from the butte, was it, Jake?" called the young man.

"Naw. Phew! Hurry up, Marie, won't you?"

The girl climbed nimbly up the gulley side

with the canteen. Her father spat again, took a deep drink, and said: "Better git the ponies round behind the buckboard. Unless Charlie gits back soon, we may have to leave the ore and make a break for the Agency."

"All right, *Père*," cheerfully responded the girl. "There haven't any of them been hit so far, I guess. They may be willing to let us off with a big scare."

"I'll give them a scare and something more when the police come," declared the young man, who had taken a new position in the opening of the gulley.

"No, you won't," remonstrated the girl as she started down to him with the canteen. "When old Ti-owa-konza sent in word that he'd call it quits over the shootin' of Nogen's killer, he meant it. But this time you fired the first shot, and if you kill one of them, it will mean a blood feud, if not an uprising."

The young man snapped his fingers. "I don't give *that* much for the whole pack of coyotes!"

"Don't forget the mine, Mr. Van," protested the older man.

"Yes, and how about me?" asked the girl as she held out the canteen.

"That settles it," he replied. "To please you, I'll—what do you say?—I'll call it quits." Shaking a gush of water out over the spout, he lifted the canteen in gallant salute and carried it to his lips.

"Better hurry with them ponies, Marie," called her father.

She did not wait for the canteen, but walked swiftly up the gulley to the restive ponies. As she led the two saddle horses around to the rear of the buckboard, the young man called up to her: "Shorten my stirrups. That pinto is the best runner in the bunch."

"Can you make it bareback?" she asked.

"He can hold on to the harness," said her father. "Tie the tugs so they won't drag."

"Yes, I guess I can hold on. I'll try the calico mare."

"Any sign on the butte?" she inquired, her supple gloved fingers deftly freeing the harnessed ponies from the buckboard.

"Nothing yet," answered the young man. "I'm expecting a bullet soon."

"This ain't no joke, Mr. Van," complained the other man. He glowered at the butte. Suddenly his trained eyes caught sight of an object moving up the steep slope of a crag. He clapped his rifle to his shoulder, sighted it, paused — and lowered the weapon, with an astonished oath.

"*Père!*" cried the girl. "What is it?"

"Wait!" he replied. "If it is — by Gar, if it is! Git ready, Mr. Van. Only don't shoot unless they rush us."

"What's that?" demanded the young man.

He was answered by the report of a rifle on

the nearest crag of the butte. Yet no bullet had come whirring down into the gulley ahead of the sound. And when he stared up at the rocky height along the barrel of his up-flung rifle, he could see no sign of smoke.

"No. Below — watch!" shouted the older man.

The report of a second smokeless-powder cartridge came down from the butte crest. The young man lowered his rifle and peered over the edge of the gulley. At the same moment a whirl of yelling horsemen swept down the coulée bank opposite the butte, and went flying away up the valley in a wild race for the nearest grove of cottonwoods.

From the butte several shots cracked in rapid succession. The fugitive Indians yelled at their ponies in a frenzy of urgency, and dug their heels into the flanks of the straining beasts at every jump. The rifleman on the butte was firing towards them, not towards the party in the gulley.

"Hold on, Marie!" said her father, jumping down the bank to her. "We'll hitch up again, and cross over to meet him."

"Who?" asked the girl.

She had been too intent on her task to see what was happening.

"The man who ran away," he answered.

"The joke's on you and Mr. Van."

"How?"

Her father grinned as he bent to refasten a tug. "Just 'cause the fellow didn't yank out his rifle and stick in the hole with us, you took him for a quitter. He had the nerve to run their fire ag'in — and you thought he was heading back for the railroad."

The girl flushed. "He's not the man on the butte!"

"Yep. Jumped the whole bunch, first shot. We better hustle. It'll look good for us to cross over to meet him."

"Marie says he's an army officer," added the young man. "It will be as well to get the ore off the Reservation. There's no telling what he has come for."

CHAPTER III

THE ACTING AGENT

WITHIN a few minutes the party had crossed the coulée bottom and started up the heavy grade on the far bank. The girl sat in the creaking buckboard; her companions rode ahead. As they neared the top of the ridge, the thoroughbred mare came trotting up from the hollow on the other side. At sight of them her rider brought her to a stand, and took out his field-glasses to peer across towards the mountains.

The older man spurred his pony up the round of the summit. "By Gar, that wasn't no bad play you made, partner," he called. "Taking the butte gave you the drop on 'em."

The man whose strategy had routed the Indians did not reply. He continued to gaze through his field-glasses even when the buckboard came to a stop in the road close alongside his mare. The girl looked up at him with confident expectancy in her sparkling eyes. He did not move. The expression of his harsh features was severe, but there was a flush under the tropical tan on his cheeks.

She hesitated, her rich color deepening. Then her pique gave way to a more generous impulse.

"May I trouble you for a look through your glasses?"

"Certainly," he responded, and he bent over in the saddle to offer them to her.

Instead of taking them, she paused to draw the gauntlet glove from her right hand. Under his cold gaze her eyes again hardened with offended pride, and again they softened and glowed with frank approbation.

"Can you forgive me?" she asked.

He bowed formally. "If you think there is anything to be forgiven."

"You know there is. I wish to apologize."

She stood up in the buckboard and held out her hand to him. It was very white and shapely. He bowed over it with grave courtesy, as he took it in his nervous clasp.

"You have no need to apologize, Miss —"

"Dupont — Marie Dupont."

"None whatever, Miss Dupont," he went on.

"I should have explained my intentions."

"Why didn't you make for the butte first thing, instead of crossing the coulée?" broke in the blond young man. "Any fool could have seen the lay of things."

"I did not wish to shoot until I understood the cause of the trouble. There was also the chance that they would cease firing when I rode towards them."

"That was nervous of you," remarked the girl's father — "that and making the second run

when they'd come so near gitting you the first time."

"You are Jacques Dupont, the Indian trader?"

"That's me — only they make it 'Jake' this side of Ottawa. Marie guessed you're an army officer."

"Captain Floyd Hardy, United States Cavalry," stated the newcomer as he raised his glasses.

The blond young man straightened out of his insolently careless pose, and spoke in the tone of a gentleman: "Pleased to meet you, Captain Hardy. You were in command of the Philippine Constabulary force that suppressed the recent insurrection in the Sulu Islands. You received favorable mention from Congress. I am Reginald Vandervyn, of the Vandervyns of Staten Island. Senator Clemmer is my uncle."

The captain responded to the introduction with a curt bow, and again raised his glasses.

"See anything of the p'leece, Cap?" asked Dupont.

"Yes. They should be here in a few minutes."

"I see them," said the girl. "They're coming down the slope this side of the Sioux Creek divide."

"They're slow," growled Vandervyn. "I'll ride back and head them 'cross country. They have good horses. They shall run down or trail out every damned buck in the bunch."

He spun his pony about to sprint down the

road into the coulée. Hardy lowered the field-glasses and uttered a stern order: "Halt!"

Angered at the command and still more at the impulse that compelled him to obey it, Vandervyn twisted about in his saddle to face the officer with a challenging stare.

"Keep that talk for your inferiors," he said. "I am acting agent of this Reservation. What I say goes. I'll have those bucks trailed till every one of them is in the guardhouse or feeding the crows."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Vandervyn," replied Hardy, and he drew an official envelope from an inside pocket. "You are only the chief clerk on this Reservation. I have been detailed to serve as acting agent."

"You?" cried Vandervyn. "Why, it was all fixed for me to be appointed agent. My uncle wired me that my name would go through for the promotion without a hitch. So you pulled the wires to cut me out?"

"I pulled no wires, Mr. Vandervyn," Hardy coldly met the accusation. "On my return from the Islands, last month, I asked for a detail to active service in the open, preferably here in the Northwest, on account of my health."

"Do you mean to say you did not ask for this place in particular?"

"No. The detail was given me because of the killing of the late agent and the reported restlessness of the tribe."

"You'll find these ugly bucks different from Moros."

"Perhaps," said Hardy. He looked at the two big, lumpy sacks that were lashed on the buckboard. "You had started for the railroad?"

"Père and Mr. Van wished to ship out the ore," explained the girl.

"Ore?" inquired Hardy.

"Well, yes, it's a sort of ore," admitted Dupont. "You see, me and —"

"I'll make it clear to Captain Hardy in two words, Jake," broke in Vandervyn. He looked at the new agent with a frank, direct gaze. "You see, Captain, some of the Indians have been getting ore, back in the mountains. Jake trades them goods for it. The barter has been a good thing for them, and so far, I believe, Jake has lost nothing."

Dupont narrowed his shrewd gray eyes as if calculating. "Well, no, that's no lie, Cap. Take it in the long run, I ain't lost nothing. It might figure out I've broke even or mebbe some better."

Vandervyn winked at Hardy. "When an Indian trader admits he may have done some better than to have come out even, we can guess what that means."

"*Nom d'un chien!*" grumbled Dupont. "Ain't the risk to count?"

"It has been an unnecessary risk for you to keep your daughter on the Reservation after the killing of Mr. Nogen," reproved Hardy. "I pre-

sume she is now going away, not to return until the trouble has passed."

"You are quite mistaken, Captain Hardy," said the girl. "I am going for the drive and to send off a mail-order. If I hadn't wanted the change, I would have stayed at the Agency. We can rely on the police. Anyway, none of the tribe would hurt me."

"That's not so certain," differed Vandervyn. "There's no telling what the murderous devils won't do when they get to ki-yi-ing. Even the police might break loose. Isn't that so, Jake?"

Dupont scratched his head and muttered:

"Well, mebbe so, Mr. Van. You can't always tell what they'll do."

"Why, *Père*," exclaimed Marie, "you know there's not the slightest danger to me."

"Well, mebbe not — to you," he acquiesced.

"Yet it will be advisable for you to remain away until I have the situation well in hand," said Hardy.

The girl's eyes flashed at the slight suggestion of dictation. "I'll do as I please, thank you," she rejoined.

"In this instance you may," agreed Hardy, "since your father admits that you are in no danger. Otherwise I would order you to remain away."

"You'd dare to order me?"

"Certainly. You should know the scope of the agent's authority. It includes the right to order

off the Reservation any one not a member of the tribe."

The girl smiled mockingly. "You forget I told you I am a quarterbreed."

"Marie!" remonstrated Vandervyn.

"Mind your own business!" she flashed back at him. "I am not ashamed that I'm a member of the tribe, and I don't care how soon he knows it, even if he is an officer of your little American army."

She turned upon Hardy, flushed, defiant, haughty. "My mother was the granddaughter of Sitting Bull. What have you to say to that, Mr. West Pointer?"

"Nothing, Miss Dupont, unless —" he paused, smiled, and continued — "unless it is to remark that I am glad the police are so near."

The girl's eyes flared with anger. With a swift movement she bent over and snatched her driving-whip from its socket on the dashboard. She straightened no less swiftly, and stood poised, the whip upraised to strike. Dupont's heavy jowl dropped. Vandervyn swung his rifle around, his large blue eyes glinting with eagerness. Hardy faced the girl with no change in his smile. Had his steady gaze wavered for an instant, she would have slashed him across the face.

"You — you!" she whispered. "Twit me with the treacherous killing of my great-grandfather, would you?"

"Treacherous? How is that?" he asked.

"He was murdered—by the police!" she cried. "You know it."

"I beg your pardon," he replied. "I had not the slightest idea of alluding to what to you must be a painful occurrence. But, since you have referred to it, I wish to say that you are misinformed. Sitting Bull was shot while resisting arrest. The police were acting under orders. The man who shot the chief had first been shot by one of the chief's men."

The scarlet that flamed in the girl's cheeks deepened to crimson. Her gaze wavered. Instead of striking Hardy, the whip lashed down across the backs of the team. The young broncos plunged and jumped forward; they whirled the buckboard down the slope away from the river.

The girl's companions jerked their ponies about to gallop after her. Hardy spoke to them in peremptory command: "Wait! Dupont, I shall ask you to bring my baggage from the railroad. Here come the police. I shall detail four of their number to go with you as escort."

"We don't need no escort," said Dupont. "Do we, Mr. Van?"

"They will go in place of Mr. Vandervyn," explained Hardy. "I must ask him to accompany me to the Agency."

The young man looked the new agent up and down with an insolent smile on his handsome, boyish face. "What if I do not choose to go back?"

"It would put me to the necessity of finding a new chief clerk," countered Hardy.

The other evidently had expected an arbitrary order. He bit his lip. It was plain that he was puzzled over the adroitly worded reply. Was it a threat, or merely a statement due to misapprehension?

"If you wish to resign," added the captain, "may I request you to telegraph for your successor to be immediately appointed and ordered here?"

"I'd resign quick enough if I could," said Vandervyn. "You're the last man I'd let order me around if I could help it."

Hardy turned to the stolid-faced Indian trader.

"Please remember my baggage. You had better ride on after your daughter. The escort will soon follow."

CHAPTER IV

CONFIDENCES

DUPONT looked from Vandervyn's sullen face to the firm jaw and keen eyes of Hardy.

"All right, Cap!" he said. "If Marie won't haul out your outfit, I'll do it my own self."

"Very well," replied Hardy.

Dupont spurred his pony and galloped off down the slope. The buckboard had already whirled across the hollow and was rattling up the opposite swell. Hardy started down into the coulée without looking about. Vandervyn cast a side glance at the stiffish back of his superior official, and stared longingly after the lissome girlish figure in the buckboard. Yet he ended by wheeling his pony to follow the thoroughbred.

The rescuers from the Agency had reined in their sweating ponies to a lope when they first caught sight of the party on the butte side of the coulée. They straggled down the gulley at a walk, eight short-haired Indian policemen in blue uniform, and a tall, loose-lipped young halfbreed in ordinary frontier clothes. As they stopped in the stream to water their ponies, each furtively studied the rider who was approaching on the big, rangy mare.

"You're too late, Charlie," called Vandervyn. "Captain Hardy climbed the butte, and the whole bunch hit out."

"Soldiers?" queried the halfbreed.

"No, he's alone — our new agent," explained Vandervyn as his pony brought him alongside Hardy at the edge of the stream. "Captain, this is Charlie Redbear, our issue clerk and interpreter."

"Interpreter?" repeated Hardy. "Redbear, do any of the police understand English?"

"No, sir, only a few words," mumbled the halfbreed.

"Tell them I am a captain of the horse soldiers — the Longknives. I have been sent here to be the agent."

Redbear interpreted in musical Lakotah, accompanying his words with swift signs. The swarthy policemen grunted approvingly, and their leader rolled out a sonorous reply. The halfbreed interpreted mechanically: "He says your eye is straight. He says they see you are a chief. He says they are ready to trail and fight the Indians whose hearts are bad."

"They are not to pursue the party," ordered Hardy. "I shall call a council of the chiefs, and ascertain the cause of the tribal unrest. Tell them."

Redbear hesitated, and looked uncertainly at Vandervyn. The chief clerk spoke to him in sharp reproof: "Do as you're told, Charlie."

Captain Hardy is now in command of the Reservation.

The halfbreed stared in astonishment, but hastened to interpret. At once the faces of the policemen became stolid. They cast covert glances at Vandervyn. Without seeming to notice their sudden change of manner, Hardy selected four to act as escort to the Indian trader and his daughter. The rest of the party followed him back up the gulley.

From the first the mare walked out in the lead. She would soon have left behind even Vandervyn's quick-stepping pinto had not her rider happened to glance about and catch the troubled expression on the younger man's face. Undistorted by passion, Vandervyn's features had all the classic beauty of a blond Apollo. Dissipation had left no mark on his smooth, florid cheeks or about his boyish blue eyes. At the moment his face was almost childlike in its wistful sadness.

Hardy waited for him to come alongside, and gravely remarked: "I wish to express my regret, Mr. Vandervyn, that my detail here has deprived you of your expected promotion."

Vandervyn's small mouth curved with a cynical smile, but softened to a more agreeable expression as he met the other's gaze. "You admit it?" he muttered.

"Having accepted the detail, I cannot now ask to be relieved," said Hardy. "But the extra pay was not one of the inducements. Permit me to

suggest that arrangements can be made to divert to your salary the amount in excess of my regular compensation as an officer."

The offer was as unexpected as it was generous. Vandervyn flushed, bit his lip, and replied half inaudibly: "You needn't think just because — No, that's not quite — You may mean well, but that's no excuse —"

"My fault, sir. Pardon me," apologized Hardy.

Vandervyn looked ahead at the mountains, considered, and turned to his companion with what seemed a cordial smile. "I am not used to being patronized, Captain; but as you did not mean it that way —"

"Not at all."

Vandervyn nodded. "You now understand that I'm not one of the common run of Indian Service employees. I was slated for *attaché* to our embassy at the Court of Saint James — celebrated the coming event with some friends, and wound up by heaving a brick through a window of the White House. Uncle shipped me out here until the storm should blow over."

Hardy may have recalled the hazings in which he had shared at West Point. His only comment was: "You were fortunate to get any appointment."

"Oh, I don't know," carelessly replied Vandervyn. "I didn't wake the President, and I had some of my wad left. The watchman sent

me home in a taxi. But the infernal grafter must have peached. I got this instead of London."

"Best thing for you."

"You think so?" said Vandervyn, his wide-open eyelids drooping. "I've been six months in this God-forsaken jumping-off place. I wouldn't have stayed six days if it hadn't been for Marie."

"Miss Dupont seems to be a very spirited young woman," dryly commented Hardy.

"Wait till you see her put on dog. She was three or four years at a convent in Ottawa. They must have farmed her out as a parlor-maid in some select British family. She can give a perfect imitation of a real lady — when she chooses."

"Yes?" said Hardy.

"You'd take it for the sure-nuff article," went on Vandervyn. "And that's not all. She can cook like an angel. Says she took a course in Domestic Science. But it must be hereditary. I'll give odds, one of her paternal ancestors was a French *chef*. French, that's the word. The way she has with men! Even this halfbreed bastard Redbear thinks he is in the running. Nogen was mad over her. He even would have married her. But he was not a man of family or culture. Fancy Jake Dupont for a father-in-law! Only thing, his squaw died five or six years ago. That was when he sent the girl to Ottawa."

Hardy looked at the mountains and changed

the subject: "May I ask you to give the particulars of the killing of Mr. Nogen?"

Vandervyn's eyelids drooped low and opened again in a wide, guileless stare. "There's little to tell. Nogen and I and Redbear were riding into the mountains. We met the murderer. He and Nogen quarreled. He shot Nogen — killed him. Then Redbear and I fired, and one of us got him — we don't know which of us it was. That's all. You'll find it in the coroner's report. I kept a copy in the office at the Agency."

"Strange that an Indian should attack a white man that way," observed Hardy. "Was the cause ascertained?"

Vandervyn twisted the tip of his blond mustache. "Well, it may be all talk, but I gather that the trouble was over this ore-buying. Nogen thought it a good thing to encourage. The chiefs felt ugly because the goods were not paid to them instead of to the laborers — the bucks and squaws who dug the ore, you know. The chiefs stirred up a lot of bad blood. No doubt they instigated the murder. They want to boss the tribe their own way."

"Let us trust that we shall have them in hand before Fall."

"Fall?" echoed Vandervyn. "You expect to stay all Summer? That shuts me out of my promotion."

"You may receive the appointment of *attaché*."

"Perhaps I don't want it just now. You forget Marie."

The gravity of the officer's face hardened to sternness. "Mr. Vandervyn, kindly bear in mind that, as agent of this Reservation, I am in charge of the moral as well as the material welfare of every member of the tribe."

Vandervyn quivered like a thoroughbred flecked with the lash. His voice shook with passion:

"Damn your impudence! I'll have you understand you're not talking to one of your rough-neck recruits. My ancestors were gentlemen before yours were ever heard of."

"I regret that you do not seem to have inherited their gentlemanly manners," came back the cool rejoinder.

Vandervyn's reddened face went crimson. The veins of his forehead began to swell. But with a strong effort he repressed his anger and forced a smile. "You went me one better, Hardy. I throw down."

The officer responded with instant sympathy:

"I see no reason why we should not become friends and work together for the good of the tribe."

"It's a go," agreed Vandervyn, and as if cleared of all ill temper by his outburst, he began a lively conversation on official society in the national capital.

Hardy had taken out his field-glasses to peer at the herd of cattle, now only a mile off to the

left. In the midst of Vandervyn's most *risque* anecdote he remarked: "Those are white cowboys. Has the owner of that herd permission to graze on Indian land?"

Vandervyn took the glasses, looked, and answered: "I know those fellows. They're coming from down the river to deliver the beef herd. That's why they didn't hear our shooting. As soon as they deliver the beeves, Indian herders will be placed in charge."

Hardy nodded, and put his mare into a trot. The pinto and the ponies behind broke into a lope. The party had topped the rise between the river and Sioux Creek. They rode down to the creek and along the winding road that skirted its willow-fringed bank for two miles up a draw to the crossing of the stream. As they rounded the base of the spur ridge on the far side, Redbear rode up on Hardy's right, and pointed to a small cabin among the quaking aspens in the mile-wide curve of the stream to the left.

"See my house, sir," he said.

"Looks well built," remarked Hardy, his field-glasses at his eyes. "Quite new, I see. You have still to put dirt on this corner of the roof."

"And to put a squaw inside," added Vandervyn.

The halfbreed's jaw muscles twitched, but he did not look away from Hardy. "I got a letter from my sister Oinna. She says she can't stay at school. She says she will die if they make her

stay at school. I want her to come and cook for me till I get married."

"How old is she?"

"More than seventeen. She is sick to come. She says she will die."

"Very well. But you must take good care of her until she is married."

"Yes, sir. I've got a lot of money," replied the halfbreed, with the proneness of a weak nature to boast. "I've got almost —"

"— Almost enough to buy you *two* squaws," cut in Vandervyn.

Redbear started to speak, caught the other's eye, and reined in his pony. Hardy did not notice this. They had rounded the toe of the spur ridge, and he was gazing up the green valley that lay outstretched in a circle of hills larger and far more picturesque than the Catskills. Sioux Creek swirled out of a canyon at the far end, to meander down a winding channel fringed with bushes and aspens and other small trees.

On a natural terrace, or "bench," two miles up, the glasses showed the log buildings at the Agency. Midway down to Redbear's cabin but across the creek was a large post-and-rail corral. Vandervyn had resumed with zest his talk about the social gaieties of which he had been deprived for half a year. Hardy said little, but his eye was busy taking in the natural features of the beautiful valley.

When they came to the slope of the bench, or

terrace, Vandervyn noticed the intent look of his companion, and inquired: "Well, what do you think of it? Talk about Siberian exile! This is the Dupont place over here."

Hardy glanced at the large double cabin a hundred yards off to the right of the road. The broad front porch gave it a homelike appearance. The two cabins before him were very small. Beyond them stood the big Agency warehouse. Its overhanging upper story showed that it had been built for use as a blockhouse, but the many windows and doors afterwards cut in the lower walls had rendered it less defensible than one of the cabins. The only persons in sight were the two Indian police who had been left in charge by Redbear.

"Well?" repeated Vandervyn.

"Not an easy place to defend," said Hardy.

"Where is the office and the guardhouse?"

"The office is in the near front corner of the warehouse. The police quarters are in the other end. You see the white tops of the tepees over there across the creek? Most of the relations of the police camp near the Agency. This first cabin is Nogen's — yours, I should say. The second is mine."

"Your quarters? May I ask you for a bite of lunch as soon as I have rubbed down my mare?"

"I board with the Duponts, but I can scare up a cold lunch," said Vandervyn.

As they dismounted, Redbear came up and sac-

cessfully curried favor with the new agent by offering to curry his mare. He led her away to the low brush stable beyond the warehouse.

After lunch, though still weary from his long ride, Hardy put in the rest of the day inspecting the Agency property and examining the accounts of the two clerks. With the exception of two or three small items on Redbear's books, everything checked accurately.

Nogen's personal property had been taken away by the coroner. Redbear swept out the cabin and brought wood for the dilapidated old cooking-stove. At twilight Hardy moved in with a roll of clean issue blankets to spread in the wooden bunk built across one end of the room.

Vandervyn brought bacon, coffee, crackers, and canned food, and the new agent cooked supper with the skill of an old campaigner. After they had eaten, the chief clerk produced cigars in anticipation of a social evening. But Hardy was so drowsy that he asked to be excused. The moment he was alone, he laid his rifle and automatic pistol in the bunk, blew out the candle, and tumbled in on his blankets, without troubling to close either the door or the one small window.

CHAPTER V

A MATTER OF WEIGHT

NOTHING disturbed the newcomer during the night. The fresh, cool breeze from the mountainsides, laden with the balsam of the pines, flowed in upon him like the wine of life.

After ten hours he awoke to find the sun streaming through his window. He sprang out of his bunk, and perceived the tall, lithe figure and handsome face of Vandervyn, who had been lounging in the open doorway.

"Good morning," he said. "I have overslept."

"Not much," Vandervyn reassured him. "I've been waiting to breakfast with you. If you care to try your hand again, I'll put up the makings."

"Are there any women about the Agency?"

"Not even a squaw."

"Then I shall first go down to the creek for a dip. You might start the fire."

Vandervyn nodded. Yet when Hardy returned from his bath the cabin was empty and the fire not even laid. He had the firebox of the stove full of crackling twigs and sticks before Van-

dervyn sauntered back, with the nonchalant explanation: "Couldn't find a match anywhere. Had to go all the way to the warehouse."

He at once volunteered his services. But his every movement seemed to result only in a misplacement of some article or an interference with Hardy's method of procedure. Laughing at his own awkwardness, he persisted in his attempts to help. After considerable confusion and delay Hardy at last finished with the cooking, and dished up the meal.

Vandervyn now became as leisurely as he had been active. He dawdled over his food, took a second serving of everything, and sought to draw Hardy into a detailed account of his Moro campaign. The officer was terse, almost laconic in his answers. Vandervyn continued to question him with persistent sociability.

At last, unable longer to restrain his impatience, Hardy excused himself, and rose to go out. Vandervyn promptly followed him. He found Hardy gazing down the valley towards the corral on the far side of the creek.

"Hello!" he remarked. "I see they are bringing the beef herd into the valley."

Hardy stepped inside, and came out with his saddle. He started down the slope to where his mare was picketed in the creek bottom.

"Wait, Captain," said Vandervyn. "Let me call one of the police to saddle up for you."

"No, thanks," was the curt reply.

The chief clerk shrugged his shapely shoulders, slipped around the end of the cabin, and sprinted for the stable. Behind the far end of the low brush building his pinto pony stood in readiness for him, saddled and bridled. He jumped into the saddle and dug in his spurs. The pinto bolted down the slope of the terrace into the creek bottom.

Vandervyn rode straight across the creek, but, once clear of the thickets, turned towards the corral. A moment later the thoroughbred came trotting through the brush a short distance downstream. Her rider was gazing in the direction of the corral. Vandervyn jerked his pony to an abrupt stop, but as suddenly eased off on the cruel curb and again swung his spurs into the pinto's flanks.

"Hi, Captain!" he called. "Pull up a bit. Thought I'd ride out with you."

Hardy reined in until Vandervyn was alongside, and then gave the mare her head. As they swung up on a rise, the chief clerk narrowed his eyes to peer ahead at the compact herd of cattle near the corral.

"Why, it looks as if they are ready to deliver," he remarked. "They may have brought Charlie along as they came up the valley past his house."

"Has it been the practice here for the issue clerk to receive the beeves?" inquired Hardy.

"I presume so. He did it the last time. Nogen and I had gone to town."

Hardy made no comment. The mare trotted along over the dry turf, rapidly lessening the distance to the corral. Soon her rider was able to perceive the heads of cattle inside the corral. At a word from him the mare broke into a run that compelled Vandervyn to use his spurs freely. But as they came alongside the end of the big enclosure Hardy drew down to a jog trot and peered through the bars at the cattle already delivered. More than half the herd had been weighed and passed through the branding-chute into the corral.

"Scrubs — all young," he commented.

"I am told they are a fine breed of cattle," remarked Vandervyn.

They were now rounding the corner of the corral. Hardy turned his gaze from the enclosed cattle to the half-dozen young steers that two white cow-punchers and five of the Indian police were driving into the pen of the scales. Redbear stood bent over the open scale-box, ready to weigh the bunch of steers as soon as they had been barred in the cage-like pen. Vandervyn swung in close to the side of the corral and looked fixedly at the issue clerk. But the halfbreed had been too intent upon his work to heed the approach of the newcomers, and he was now fiddling with the adjustment mechanism of the scales.

Hardy had swung around back of Redbear to where a dismounted cowboy was stirring the fire in which the branding-irons were being

heated. As the man rose, Hardy asked him brusquely:

"Are you in charge here for the contractor?"

The puncher looked him up and down with an evil leer and replied: "What if I am?"

"These cattle run small."

"Her'fords stand low. Mebbe you're used to longhorns."

"They are mostly two-year-olds — scrubs at that," asserted Hardy.

"Well, what of it? Who the hell are you, anyway?" truculently demanded the cowboy.

The released cattle bolted out of the scale-pen into the branding-chute. Hardy faced towards the issue clerk and called out: "What did that lot weigh?"

Redbear was engrossed in marking down the figures in his official tally-book. He called back without looking around or even raising his eyes from the book: "Eleven, four, thirty."

"Eleven thousand, four hundred!" ejaculated Hardy. "Impossible!"

"Her'fords stand low but stocky," said the puncher.

Hardy paid no heed to him. He was looking sternly at Redbear. The halfbreed had twisted around and was gaping at him, slack-jawed. There was guilt and fear in his furtive eyes and cringing shoulders. Hardy dismounted. Redbear turned to put his hand on the adjusting mechanism of the scales.

"Hands off! Stand aside!" There was a note in Hardy's voice that riveted the attention of every one and caused the issue clerk to jump away from the scales. Hardy went forward to the scale-box and started to move an adjustment weight.

"Here, you!" called one of the mounted punchers. "Leave them scales alone!"

"I'd like to weigh my mare," said Hardy, his mouth set in a grim smile. "At about what will she tip the beam?"

The man faced away, muttering curses, and his mate chuckled openly at his discomfiture. The fellow in charge of the branding-irons scowled at the intruder and retorted with marked insolence: "This here ain't no hawss-weighing."

As he spoke, he slapped the mare on the back with his hat. The next instant his right hand and the right hands of his mates dropped to their holsters. The high-spirited mare had plunged under the wanton blow and was bounding violently aside. Her rider had not flung the reins over her head, cowboy fashion, when he dismounted. She was free to bolt. All except Hardy looked to see her do so. Instead, she wheeled around Redbear and came to a stand beside her master, quivering but docile.

Hardy's eyes flashed with indignation, but he balked the punchers by standing motionless. Had he even unintentionally dropped his hand towards his hip, they would have shot him down. He spoke with cool authority: "Do you wish

me to understand that you are accomplices in this fraud? "

" Who the hell are you? " The branding-iron man repeated his truculent query.

" Captain Hardy, United States Cavalry, acting agent of this Reservation," was the terse reply.

Even the insolent leader was taken aback. He looked towards Vandervyn. The chief clerk met the glance with an aggravating smile, and called jeeringly: " You'll have to knuckle under to him. He has official papers to show he is boss here. I've been double-crossed."

The man scowled at Hardy. " Well, what you going to do? "

" I shall turn back this herd," said the new agent.

" All of 'em? "

" Yes."

" Say, you ain't got any gall, have you? How about the contract? "

Hardy called, without turning his head: " Mr. Vandervyn, may I trouble you to bring me the beef contract? "

" Whatever you order," ironically replied the chief clerk. He swung his pony around close to the puncher farthest from Hardy and muttered in passing: " You fellows lose your rake-off if you let him bluff you. I am agent if we get rid of him."

Touched with the spur, the pinto jumped and

started off on a lope. The two mounted cowboys drifted over beside their leader and began talking with him in undertones. Redbear began to edge off to one side. When he was several paces away from Hardy, he spoke to the five stolidly on-looking policemen. With no sign of surprise the Indians started to ride around the scattering cattle of the herd still outside the corral.

"Halt those men, Redbear!" ordered Hardy.

"What's the use?" scoffed the unmounted puncher. "We can plug the whole bunch and you too."

"Give my order," commanded Hardy.

Redbear no longer dared to hesitate. He called out a guttural word. The policemen halted. Hardy stepped towards the cowboys.

"Who is your owner?" he inquired.

"You'd like to know, wouldn't yuh?" mocked the man to whom Vandervyn had spoken.

"I shall know soon. It is in the contract."

"Well, what of it? We've got this beef herd here for delivery, and we've made delivery. Yuh needn't think we're going to back up. You'll read that contract the way *we* see it. Savvy?"

"I shall hold to the exact terms of the contract," said Hardy.

"You big stiff! Think you can bluff us, do you?" sneered the man on foot, and he picked up one of the branding-irons.

"You will not brand any more of these cattle," said Hardy.

"Just you watch me," rejoined the puncher. He raised the iron and held the sparkling, white-hot brand towards the officer. "Now, you little tin soldier, git out of the way, or I'll give you something to show you belong to the Indian Bureau."

He stepped forward until the glowing brand was within a few inches of Hardy's face. Hardy did not flinch a hairbreadth. His resolute gaze turned from the threatener to the grinning mounted punchers, and from them to the Indian police. The corners of his mouth twitched in a quick smile.

"Better put up your hands," he advised.

Swiftly the three glanced about at the Indians, the hands of the mounted men dropping to their hips. They saw the five policemen looking on, stolid and inoffensive. And in the same instant that they perceived the trick which had been played upon them, they heard a peremptory command: "Hands up!"

The metallic ring in Hardy's voice sent the hands of the two mounted men skyward. The third man had sufficient recklessness to wait until he had looked at Hardy. He saw the muzzle of a long-barreled automatic pistol pointed between his eyes. The branding-iron fell from his grasp and his hands shot upwards.

"Don't shoot!" he grunted.

There was a moment's pause. The man's glaring gaze shifted to something behind Hardy, and

one corner of his slit mouth drew up, exposing the canine tooth. Quick as a flash, Hardy circled around, to bring Redbear as well as the police and his prisoners within his range of vision. The halfbreed hastily lifted his hand from his hip. Hardy beckoned to him, and spoke in the same metallic voice: "Come here, Redbear."

The halfbreed obeyed, his swarthy face mottled, his knees shaking. Hardy pointed at the punchers. "Disarm those men."

Redbear hesitated. He knew the reputation of the trio. The humorous one grinned at him and relieved his tragic dilemma with a cheerful, "Hurry up, Charlie! I'm tired of this here stretching."

"Well, if you don't blame me," mumbled the halfbreed, and he gathered in the three revolvers.

"Unload them and lay them on the scale-box," ordered Hardy, as he thrust his pistol inside his coat. "When this matter is settled, you will return them to their owners."

"Say, you're white," commented the humorous puncher. "Your little show costs me a hundred, but it's worth the price."

"Collect the herd while I'm waiting for the chief clerk," directed Hardy.

The two moup'ed men at once rode off, one chuckling, the other sullen. The third was black with rage. But he was beaten, and he knew it. He waddled over to his pony and rode away after his mates.

They were still engaged in bunching the herd when Vandervyn came loping back from the Agency. The direction from which he approached enabled him to see Hardy and Redbear while still some distance away. When he reached them, his look was as frank and guileless as a child's.

Hardy took the contract and glanced at the backing. "So," he said. "These are Dupont's cattle."

"Hadn't they told you?" replied Vandervyn.

"No." Hardy skimmed through the contract, and returned to a paragraph in the midst. "I see that it is optional for the agent to accept young stock at a reduced price. I shall turn back all that have not yet been branded. The others will be reweighed and accepted in accordance with the terms of the contract."

"How do you know that Dupont will agree to that?" asked Vandervyn.

"He agreed when he signed this contract. The scales have been adjusted. Call his men to test them."

At a signal from Vandervyn the punchers rode in. But they refused to examine the scales or to take any part in the reweighing. At this Hardy promptly ordered them to drive the herd of unbranded steers down the valley and off the Reservation. With them he sent a policeman to see that they obeyed and to return their revolvers when they had crossed Wolf River.

CHAPTER VI

SMOKE AND HAZE

UNTIL the branded cattle had been reweighed and the three officials had ridden in to the Agency office, Hardy said nothing to Redbear about his part in the conspiracy to defraud. The issue clerk's statement of the number and weight of the beeves delivered was made out by him and witnessed by Vandervyn.

Hardy certified to the correctness of the report, and then swung around in his swivel chair to fix the halfbreed with a cold stare.

"Now, sir," he said, "have you any reason to give why I should not put you off this Reservation?"

The long delay had brought Redbear hope of leniency from his superior. This sudden query and the sternness of Hardy's look instantly punctured his over-inflated assurance. He cringed and dropped his gaze to the floor to hide the fear and resentment in his eyes.

"Have you nothing to say?" demanded Hardy.

The halfbreed mumbled behind his stiff lips and cast a desperate glance at Vandervyn.

Hardy shifted his gaze to the chief clerk and said: "He looks to you, sir. What have you to say about this affair?"

"For one thing, I don't think you'll put him off the Reservation," answered Vandervyn.

"Why not?"

"He is a member of the tribe."

"Uh-huh, I am," muttered Redbear.

"Then I shall put you under arrest," said Hardy.

"Arrest?" cried the culprit. "Put me in the guardhouse? But—but how can I do my work if I—"

"Mr. Vandervyn will attend to your duties until the arrival of your successor."

The halfbreed again cringed and looked to Vandervyn for succor. But the chief clerk was calmly lighting a cigar and made no attempt to aid him. Hardy studied the expression of the guilty man. Despair had emphasized the fact that his face was weak rather than vicious. A groan forced its way between the stiffened lips: "Oinna!"

"Your sister," said Hardy. The severity of his look lessened. "Have you any excuses to offer for your conduct?"

At the change of tone the halfbreed looked up and took a quick step forward, his heavy face suddenly animated with hope. "Yes, yes, sir; of course I—" He stopped for an instant at sight of Vandervyn, who had slipped around

beside Hardy. Then his plea for mercy burst from him in an almost incoherent rush of words:

"I couldn't help it — they'd have killed me! I haven't got your nerve. They're all three bad men — I'm only a halfbreed. Everybody's down on halfbreeds. All you white men despise us; the full-bloods hate us. Those punchers — they'd have shot me down like a dog if I hadn't done it. I haven't any chance. I can't get a decent living off the Reservation. Everybody kicks down a halfbreed. You know what would happen to my sister. I've been to Carlisle — I can't become a blanket Indian. They wouldn't let me, anyway. This is the only job I have — that I'll ever have. Mr. Van got it for me when the other man quit. He knows how hard up I was. He knows — "

"That will do," interrupted Hardy, and he gave his decision without a moment's hesitancy:

"On account of your sister, and because there is reason to believe you were forced to share in the attempted fraud, I shall take no action in the matter at this time. You will continue in your present position on probation."

"I — I don't understand, sir."

"You are put on your good behavior. I shall draw up a report of the affair, but shall not send it in unless you again lay yourself open to charges of misconduct."

The sternness of the concluding words struck

the smirk from Redbear's face. He mumbled a reply and started to shuffle around to his desk, on the other side of the office partition.

"Wait!" said Hardy. "I wish the chiefs and headmen of the tribe summoned to meet me in council as soon as possible."

"It is a day's ride to the camps farthest back in the mountains," remarked Vandervyn.

Hardy considered, and looked up at Redbear.

"Does not this tribe use smoke signals?"

"Not for a long time, not since I was a boy, sir. I never learned how to do it."

"That old sergeant of police will know," predicted Hardy. "Come!"

Vandervyn lingered behind the others, and followed them only to the rear corner of the warehouse. When he had seen them ride off across Sioux Creek towards the highest of the mountains that encircled the valley, he went back into the office, opened the safe, and carefully sorted over its contents. All letters addressed to the late agent and to himself he took out and locked in his desk.

Meantime Hardy and Redbear with the police sergeant passed through the camp of the families of the police, where they added two old bucks to their party. A pony trail led up through the pines on the mountain-side to the bare granite crag of the summit. Mid-afternoon found the Indians standing around a greenwood fire, alternately covering it with a blanket and permit-

ting puffs of the dense smoke to rise in the still air.

In less than half an hour Hardy's glasses showed him an answering smoke on a peak fifteen or twenty miles distant. When he called attention to it, the police sergeant pointed out still another smoke signal off to the left of the first and several miles farther away. The old bucks turned from the fire and started down to where the mare and ponies had been left.

"The chiefs will come tomorrow," Redbear interpreted their answer to Hardy's inquiry.

Hardy dismissed him and raised his glasses for a last look at the grand panorama of the mountains. Through the crystal-clear air he could see three signal smokes rising far beyond the first. He swung around, to look over the intervening hills and ridges at the vast expanse of treeless, undulating plains off towards the railroad and at the butte on the bank of Wolf River. As he was focusing the glasses, they dipped into line with a party on the divide above Sioux Creek. The small uncovered vehicle and the group of riders behind it convinced him that the party was Dupont's. He frowned, and hurried down from the crag.

The jaded buckboard ponies were tugging their load up the slope of the terrace when Hardy came down the line of Agency buildings at a gallop. He met the buckboard before it had reached the level of the terrace. Marie Dupont

was driving; but on the seat beside her was a brown-eyed, olive-skinned girl, who averted her handsome face with childish shyness as Hardy wheeled his mare and reined up alongside.

Marie flushed under the officer's direct gaze, though, unlike her companion, she did not seek to avoid it. He raised his hat with punctilious politeness. She bowed, and, gazing back at him with a level glance, quietly remarked: "Good afternoon, Captain Hardy. I have brought your luggage."

"That was very kind of you," said Hardy as he glanced at the other girl.

Marie smiled in instant appreciation of the fact that he had spoken to her as to an equal. She patted her companion's work-reddened hand with her gloved fingers. "This is Charlie Redbear's sister Oinna. They did not treat her well at school, so she ran away to come home. I want her to live with me; but she says she must be with her brother. You will not send her back?"

The young girl looked at the new agent with a smile of timid appeal, and as quickly drooped her head in bashful embarrassment. Hardy's gaze softened, and he answered reassuringly:

"Redbear spoke of his sister. It will be all right."

"You are most kind to say it," approved Marie with the condescension of a gracious young queen. Hardy put up his hand to his bristly mustache. The girl leaned forward to glance

past him, and remarked: "Here comes Charlie now — and Mr. Van."

She brought her team to a welcome stop where the road reached the terrace level. Hardy wheeled his mare around, and gazed sternly down the slope to where Dupont was following at the head of the four policemen. Neither of the girls observed his look. Their eyes were fixed on the young men who were approaching from the warehouse.

Marie spoke with a throaty quaver in her rich voice: "Captain Hardy, we shall expect you to dine with us this evening."

"I regret that I must decline," he replied a trifle brusquely. "I have unpleasant business to discuss with your father."

"Unpleasant?" The girl stared at him, her broad black eyebrows curving questioningly.

"I trust that he can explain the matter," said Hardy.

"He must. I shall count on you as well as Mr. Vandervyn." She turned in the seat and called to her father: "Hurry up, *Père*! Captain Hardy has a bone to pick with you. He won't agree to pick one with me until he has settled with you."

"Huh?" grunted Dupont. He looked stolidly from Hardy and his daughter to Vandervyn, who was now near the buckboard. "What's up?"

"The joke is on you, Jake," replied Vandervyn as he swept off his hat to Marie. "Your punchers rounded up a lot of young stock, in-

stead of the four-year-olds you ordered, and Charlie got balled up over the adjustment of the scales. When Captain Hardy insisted upon a strict enforcement of the terms of the contract, your bold, bad desperadoes tried to kick up a rumpus."

Dupont stared incredulously at Hardy.

"Needn't try to string *me*, Mr. Van," he scoffed. "There ain't no holes in him."

"No. He got the drop on your flock of land pirates," rejoined Vandervyn.

Dupont's crafty eyes widened. "*Nom d'un chien!* He got the drop on *them?*"

"That's not the point, Dupont," curtly broke in Hardy. "Explain your connection with this attempt to defraud the Bureau of Indian Affairs."

"What attempt? I don't know nothing about no attempt," asserted the trader in a blustering tone. He jerked his pony to a stand close before Hardy, and fixed his scowling gaze upon Redbear.

The halfbreed did not see him. He had halted a few paces away from the buckboard, transfixed at sight of his sister and Marie seated side by side. Oinna had uttered a glad little cry as he approached, but, meeting Vandervyn's bold glance, had crouched closer to Marie, too shy to jump down and run to meet her brother.

Vandervyn interposed between Hardy and the trader with the conciliatory manner of a mutual friend: "Wait, Jake! Don't blame Captain

Hardy. He can't know that you ordered your men to cut out only four-year-old steers for delivery. The fact that the grafters — "

" Let Mr. Dupont speak for himself," interrupted Hardy.

Vandervyn bit his red lip — and then smiled. Dupont had ceased scowling. He was rubbing the side of his grizzled head with a stubby forefinger.

" By Gar, Cap, that's all right," he said. " Old Jake can do his own talking. That there order was just what Mr. Van says. You don't know them N. G. punchers. Bad lot, all three of 'em. But I can't git nobody else. The big outfits take all the good men. Just like 'em to give me a dirty deal. They knowed I was going over to town. So they fixes up a deal with Redbear."

" What do you say to that, Redbear? " interrogated Hardy.

The halfbreed cringed and faltered: " You — you said — Anyway, he — he was the — "

" What? " growled Dupont.

" I — I did it for you! " panted the halfbreed.

Dupont's jowl dropped. Marie stared at him in consternation.

Vandervyn spoke sharply to the halfbreed:

" No lies, Charlie. You said the punchers made you do it. Now you try to lay it on Mr. Dupont."

" No, no! " disclaimed Redbear, his wavering gaze caught and fixed by the menace in Vander-

vyn's blue eyes. "They made me do it. Only — only I thought it would please Mr. Dupont."

"Please me?" growled Dupont. "You don't mean to say I wanted you to steal for me, do you?"

"I didn't say so, did I, sir?" the halfbreed appealed to Hardy with instinctive adroitness. "I thought if I got a lot of money —" He stopped short, but a covert glance at Marie was more eloquent of his meaning than words would have been.

Hardy looked at Dupont. "Are you willing to give your word that you had nothing to do with the transaction?"

"Sure," answered the trader with bluff heartiness. "I ain't up to no such crooked deals. I don't have to. I make honest profits, one hundred, sometimes two hundred per cent, on my trade. Everybody knows I'm square all round. Why, last time I opened accounts with a new bone-and-bead factory way back East there in Omaha —"

"Chuck it, Jake!" said Vandervyn. "I have a brilliant idea. Lay you two to one, I've guessed how those punchers meant to work you."

"Huh?"

"You remember that offer from the Jones outfit for anything you have."

"They wanted to buy *Père's* brand," Marie remarked aside to Hardy. "That means all his stock — his entire cattle business, you know."

"Well, what of it?" her father asked Vandervyn. "I agreed to sell 'em three hundred —"

"Three hundred two-year-olds," Vandervyn cut in. "Don't you see? Your punchers switched the herds. They aimed to deliver the young stock here, and drive the prime beeves down around Jones' range, and rustle them — if that is the right word."

"By Gar!" muttered the trader. "By Gar!"

"You can send a man to the Jones outfit, with an order for them to gather in the herd and mail you a check," suggested Vandervyn. "Not even those three desperadoes will care to buck so big an outfit."

"We will send one of the police," said Hardy.

"That's white of you, Cap," Dupont admitted. He turned to Redbear with a benevolent smile. "Charlie, I don't blame you for doing what them low-down rustlers made you; only you oughtn't to —"

"Cut it short, *Père*," interrupted Marie. "Oinna is tired. Charlie, go and rope a couple of fresh ponies. You can take her home in the buckboard as soon as we have unloaded. Captain, I shall send over your luggage in a few minutes. You need not dress for dinner."

Thus dismissed, Hardy raised his hat and rode away. Vandervyn accompanied the two girls and Dupont to the trader's cabin.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST CARD

WHEN Hardy's baggage was delivered at his cabin, he came up the line from the office. As he was unpacking his scant wardrobe, an Indian boy, dressed in a clean cast-off suit of Dupont's, came to the door. Without stopping to knock, the lad thrust in his head and announced gutturally:

"M'ree him say you come six."

Hardy glanced at his watch. There lacked only ten minutes to the hour. He nodded to the boy and signed him to go. Ten minutes later he stepped up on the porch of the Dupont house, attired in a tailor-made suit which, though a trifle out of style, was as fresh as if new. His two days' growth of beard was clean shaven, his shoes polished as if by a bootblack.

Before he could knock, Dupont stepped from the rear door of his trade store, which faced away from the porch.

"Hello, Cap!" he greeted the guest with bluff cordiality. "Glad to see you. Walk right in."

Hardy crossed the threshold and paused. Had it not been for the smallness of the high windows, he might have fancied himself in the parlor of a

city flat. The floor was covered with linoleum, colored and patterned to resemble waxed hardwood. The Oriental rugs were real, if not of the most expensive kinds. The walls were papered with a quiet tapestry pattern. Between the dark, rough-hewn beams the paneled ceiling was painted a light cream that gave it elevation. The adobe fireplace was set with a modern grate and faced with a tile mantel. The few pictures were well chosen. There was no sign of the guns, skins, and Navajo blankets that Hardy had expected to see.

Vandervyn, lolling in an easy-chair beside the small, well-filled bookcase, looked up over a week-old paper from the national capital and smiled in boyish enjoyment of the new agent's surprise.

Dupont grunted apologetically: "Don't think I'm plumb crazy. It's all Marie — She done it when she come home from school. Said she couldn't live here unless she had things just like in Ottawa. Cried till I had to give in."

"Don't you let him con you, Captain," chuckled Vandervyn. "Wait till you get better acquainted with the family. You'll know it was Jake who wept because Marie sent off the mail-order and he had to foot the bills."

"Well, anyway, there wasn't nobody she could hire to do the work, and I had to go out on round-up." Dupont sought to cover his discomfiture. "She set to and done it all her own self. I didn't have to pay a cent for that."

"Don't forget she made you pipe the spring, to bring water into the house, and buy the best kitchen range in the country, and put up ice every year."

"Needn't try to joke about them things, Mr. Van. Them're sensible things — help in the cooking, same's her training the woman and boy to do the rough work. No, them things're money well spent. Sit down, Cap. Make yourself to home. Hey, Marie! you there! Here's Cap Hardy. Bring in that bottle me and Mr. Van was sampling, will you?"

Hardy picked the stiffest chair in the room, sat down — and promptly rose to a position of polite attention. A young lady had appeared in the doorway at the side of the room, — a young lady in a *semi-décolleté* gown, the color of which was a trifle too vivid a pink, but the lines were irreproachable. From under the hem peeped the toe of a stylish slipper. The creamy whiteness of her full, round throat was displayed by a necklace of large coral beads with a gold pendant. Her mass of coal-black hair was dressed in the very latest mode. Her cheeks were as highly colored as if rouged.

For an imperceptible moment the girl paused in the entrance, gracefully balancing the beaten brass tray that held seltzer and whisky bottles and glasses. Vandervyn gazed at her with the brand of admiration that passes over the footlights from the first-row seats to the prettiest

girl in the chorus. Hardy bowed as he would have saluted his colonel's lady or the daughter of a Moro chief, if either had been his hostess.

The girl's eyes sparkled as she noted his change of dress, his immaculate linen, and clean-shaven chin. His bow won a smile that may have been due either to gratified vanity or to a commendable self-respect.

"Good evening, Captain Hardy," she greeted him in a tone that caused Vandervyn to straighten in his chair. "It is a great pleasure to have you dine with us."

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Dupont," declared Hardy.

"You've hit it, Cap," put in Dupont. "You can just bet your bottom dollar on it you won't kick yourself for coming when you git to *her* feed-trough."

Vandervyn could perceive no change in Hardy's expression. But the girl's vision was more acute—or her fancy more active. The sable-black pupils of her eyes dilated in their blue-black irises, and her perfectly molded chin rose a fraction of an inch. She placed the tray on a tea-table, bowed composedly, and left the room. Vandervyn looked at Hardy with an ironical smile. The silent mockery was wasted. Hardy was watching Dupont uncork the whisky bottle.

"One moment, Mr. Dupont," he said. "As you are my host, the question is an awkward one to ask—yet is there not a law or a rule of the

Indian Bureau against bringing liquor upon a reservation?"

Dupont stared around at the inquirer in blank surprise. Before he could find words to answer, Vandervyn replied for him: "According to the strict letter of the law, Captain, you are right. The purpose, of course, is to keep apart Poor Lo and the fire-water of the paleface. You can't fancy that Jake would be fool enough to sell liquor to the Indians."

"By Gar, you bet I don't — not when it's ten-year-old rye," qualified Dupont. "You can't git no better stuff out of Canada. Marie made me buy some wine, too, to celebrate your coming. She said it was up to us to loosen up, seeing as how you had shooed off them bucks."

"Ah, since you put it that way," Hardy accepted the explanation. "I must ask you, however, not to bring anything more of the kind across the river."

"Of course he will not, if you object," assured Vandervyn. "Nogen didn't read the law as you do; but if you believe in dry weather for ourselves as well as for the Indians, you're the boss."

"Sure, and here's one all round to show there ain't no hard feeling," said Dupont.

He poured out three drinks, each measured to the brim of a whisky glass. His own and Vandervyn's disappeared at a gulp. Hardy took a sip, and asked for a seltzer. He had yet to take

a second sip when the host refilled the empty glasses and turned about with the whisky bottle.

"Hello!" he said. "What's the matter with it?"

"Very good rye," said Hardy.

"Don't look like it. You ain't took more'n a drop. Most army men can git outside good liquor fast as anybody."

"I prefer to sip mine," stated Hardy.

The bottle was handed around still another time and found him not yet finished with his first drink. But Dupont had already begun to mellow.

"Here's to your boiled shirt, Cap," he toasted. "Stand-up collar and a white shirt. It's sure a high-toned celebration. Better wear 'em careful. You'll have to mail 'em a hundred miles to the nearest Chinaman when they git dirty."

"Cheaper to throw them away, and send a mail-order to Chicago for new ones," put in Vandervyn. He added, as he adjusted the fashionable tie that was hardly in keeping with his gray flannel shirt: "But you'll soon take to the local styles."

Marie again appeared in the doorway. She bowed to the guests with impressive formality.

"If you will enter, gentlemen."

Hardy went in between Vandervyn and Dupont. He avoided the girl's proud gaze by looking about at the dining-room. It was as citified as the parlor and no less tasteful. The walls

were covered with burlap, paneled with strips of wood and beading. The small oval table was spread with a cloth of snowy French damask. The silver was real antique ware.

The unsmiling hostess bowed Hardy to the seat of honor.

"We certainly are in for it, Captain," remarked Vandervyn. "This cloth doesn't come out often, but when it does, the shade of Epicurus sighs with envy."

"This here layout is Marie's," explained Dupont. "She was bound to turn herself loose to even up what happened at the river yesterday. No bluffing on us dishing up the same rations regular."

"I hope you to learn whether I am to have the pleasure of boarding with Miss Dupont," remarked Hardy.

"You sure have, if you're ready to shell out for it. Grub comes high here."

"And Marie is a *chef*," added Vandervyn.

Hardy waited until the Indian boy had served the soup. At last he succeeded in fixing the cool gaze of his hostess. "Please do not consider that hospitality requires you to do me the favor, Miss Dupont," he said. "I do not wish to intrude, highly as I should appreciate --"

The deference of his manner soothed the girl's wounded pride. She smiled, and combined a friendly response with a side thrust at her father:

"Indeed, we shall be delighted to have you,

Captain Hardy — I because of your company, and *Père* because of the cash."

"By Gar, he won't git no better feed in no hotel," vowed Dupont.

"I can foresee that," agreed Hardy.

His faith was justified by each successive course. Though all the vegetables had come out of cans, they were prepared with consummate skill. The trout were fresh from the creek; the grouse and beef had been hung exactly the right length of time in the dugout icehouse; the champagne was *frappé*. But even Vandervyn was astonished at sight of the fruit, until, during one of the girl's visits to the kitchen between courses, her father explained that she had waylaid the dining-car of the through express while the engine was taking water.

"No, you bet," he concluded. "Ain't nothing'll down Marie, once she gits set on doing anything."

"Not even the tightness of *Père's* purse-strings," rallied Vandervyn, waving a slightly unsteady hand at the real Limoges porcelain.

Hardy had taken very little of the champagne. But between the girl's vivid beauty, the good cheer, and the cordiality of his companions, his usually half-sad and wholly severe expression had given place to genial animation.

Upon the return of the hostess he addressed her in a tone that drew a stare of open resentment from Vandervyn: "You are wonderful,

Miss Dupont, wonderful! One day in an Indian attack, followed by a fifty-mile drive; the next, fifty miles back, and such a dinner as this!"

"First the great-granddaughter of Sitting Bull, then *la bonne cuisinière Française*," flashed back the girl. "Where is the wonder? Two streaks of heredity, plus childhood in the saddle and a course in Domestic Science."

"Yet you must be fatigued."

"When I have done what I set out to do, then I permit myself to consider whether I need rest. There was a time when my red ancestors had no horses. They ran down their game afoot."

"You will always ride — or drive," bantered Vandervyn.

"By Gar, she won't never be driven," declared Dupont with conviction.

Vandervyn smiled over his champagne glass. He did not notice that Marie was looking at him. But Hardy was watching her. He saw her proud face soften and her brilliant eyes melt with tender passion. His own face became grave. A moment later she was rallying him for his seriousness, and her animation soon compelled him to forget what he had seen. Vandervyn had not been mistaken in his assertion that she could act the lady to perfection when she chose. Though the cigars proved to be Havanas, they were brought in much sooner than suited Hardy.

The hostess signed her Indian boy to take the box into the parlor, together with the ice bucket,

in which was still left a bottle of champagne. As he obeyed, she bowed her dismissal of the guests from the table.

"I shall now permit myself to be fatigued," she said. "Good evening, Mr. Vandervyn. Good evening, Captain Hardy."

Vandervyn nodded, and followed Dupont with a nonchalant bearing that drew attention from the slight uncertainty of his step. Hardy lingered for a word of appreciation: "This has been a most enjoyable evening, Miss Dupont."

She chose to disregard the sincerity and warmth behind the formal phrase. "You are very kind, Captain Hardy. But pray do not overestimate. Where all else is off-color, three-quarters white seems dazzling."

"Believe me, it is not a question of contrast or comparison," he protested. "Not even in New York or Washington —"

"You flatter me. And now, as I am tired —"

He bowed and left her, concealing the sting of her polite rebuff under his grave smile. The Indian boy, who was standing at the parlor door, closed it behind the guest at a sign from Marie.

Vandervyn was again in his easy-chair. Dupont had refilled the whisky glasses and was opening the box of cigars. Hardy took a cigar and declined the whisky. At this, Vandervyn waved his hand in a lordly gesture towards the champagne pail.

"Uncle Sam is correct, Jake," he advised.

"Rye will keep. Fizz must be absorbed before the ice melts."

Dupont took the drink that he had poured out for himself and undertook the perilous operation of opening the champagne. He fumbled the bottle and would have dropped it had not Vandervyn jumped up and taken it from him. Thrust aside by the younger man, he lurched and sat down in a chair near Hardy.

"Shelipp'ry — ben in ice," he explained with solemn emphasis. He threw back his head and burst into an uproarious laugh. "Shelipp'ry — like that *gobe-mouche* Redbear. Him trying to smooth me down, weighing in scrubs for four-year-olds — zif that'd give him a show with M'rie! An' me the squarest trader in the U. S.! Why, lash time I got goods on credit, they shent me a skeshule to lisht my li'bil'ties, 'n' I jush took my pen in han' 'n' wrote 'cross tha' shere lish, 'I don't owe no man nushing.'" He again threw back his head and let out a horse laugh.

"Poor grammar, but rich rhetoric, Jake," remarked Vandervyn as he filled the champagne glasses. "You told me they gave you the credit you asked for."

"I got the goods," said Dupont, pulling himself together and sobering his tongue with an effort. "Nothing like being on the square. That's what makes me sore at them there chiefs, Cap. Won't let me help out the bucks and squaws what're aching to work — good pay in trade

goods, and us taking all risks on the ore smelting out N. G. What'll the tribe do after they git their last issue next Spring? That's what I'd like to know."

"Yes, Captain," said Vandervyn. "Next Spring will come the last issue of goods that is provided for in the Government treaty with this tribe. They will be in a bad fix if something is not done to get them used to white ways."

"How about a new treaty, to partition the Reservation and give land in severalty to each head of a family?" suggested Hardy.

"That would take a long time to bring about, and meantime the young bucks should be taught to work. Why wouldn't it be a good idea for us to take charge of the mine — pay all who want to work fair wages, and take the risk of getting our money back out of the ore shipments?"

As Vandervyn made the suggestion, he smiled ingenuously, and his handsome, flushed face shone with philanthropic enthusiasm. Hardy's face lighted with a responsive glow. He smiled into the boyish blue eyes.

"The proposal does you credit," he responded. "You may count on me to contribute my share."

"You will, will you, Cap?" exclaimed Dupont. He reached out his thick-fingered hand. "You're in, hey? Put it there, old pard! Just you make them damn ki-yi-s savvy they've got to hustle for what we give 'em, like Nogen done, and we'll

round up fifty thousand apiece before snow flies."

"What's that?" demanded Hardy, instantly stiffening to stern rigidity.

He failed to catch the furious glance from Vandervyn that sent their half-fuddled host lurching over to the whisky bottle. When he did turn, the chief clerk met his hard glance with a knowing wink and a chuckling comment: "Spiffled!"

Hardy did not smile. "Explain," he ordered.

"What?—about Nogen's insistence that the Indians should mine enough ore for them to get fair livings for themselves?" glibly inquired Vandervyn.

"The rest?" queried Hardy.

"Oh—you mean Jake's pipe dream that this low-grade stuff may sometime turn into a streak of solid gold. But of course you wouldn't stand for the three of us dividing up the proceeds, even if it did turn out a bonanza."

"Certainly not."

"Your idea would be to give all the profits to the tribe, even if we had bought the ore and taken the risk of its turning out worthless."

"I am the acting agent, not a trader."

"*Nom'chien!*" muttered Dupont. "That ain't no way to treat a white man, Cap. Won't you let 'em trade me no more ore?"

"I shall investigate before I decide," said Hardy, and he rose to leave. "Good evening. Good evening, Mr. Vandervyn."

He went out. Dupont gaped after him, and grunted incredulously: "Fifty thousand—made it fifty thousand, and he didn't jump at it!"

"Told you so," snapped Vandervyn. "But we'll fix him yet—two more cards up our sleeve. If one fails to take the trick, we'll play the other. We're not going to be bluffed out at this stage of the game."

Dupont caught at the whisky bottle with a shaking hand. "No, by Gar," he protested. "We don't play that other card, Mr. Van. I quit first."

"Oh, well," replied Vandervyn, "if you're going to throw down, I shall not try to play it alone. But you're in on the next play."

Dupont grunted, and poured himself a full glass of whisky.

CHAPTER VIII

BY-PLAY

SUNRISE found Vandervyn riding down the valley on his nimble-footed pinto. A mile and a half from the Agency he left the road and cantered across into the bend where Redbear had pointed out his new house to Hardy. The low cabin stood on a slight knoll beside the stream, in the midst of a grove of quaking asps.

When Vandervyn rode up, Redbear was shoveling clay upon the uncovered brush thatch at one corner of the roof. The halfbreed did not stop work until his visitor drew rein almost within arm's reach. Vandervyn met his civil greeting with a cynical smile.

"So you've builded you a home, Charlie—neat little cot, and too new for vermin. You've heard the saying, 'Fools build houses for wise men to live in.'"

"What do you mean?" questioned the halfbreed, his weak jaw dropping.

"How's your sister Winna? That's the name, isn't it?"

"No, we say it O-ee-nah. The school people

made her get up at four. I told her to sleep all day, if she liked. What do you mean about my house? "

" Come up the creek. I want to tell you something," replied Vandervyn. When they had gone beyond ear-shot of the cabin, he stopped his pony and faced the uneasy halfbreed with a look of sympathetic concern. " Can't you guess, Charlie? It's all up."

Redbear's face turned a mottled gray. " All — all up? " he gasped.

" Amounts to the same thing," answered Vandervyn. " We sounded him last night. He won't sit in to the game — the board-backed fool! No chance of a deal with him, and you know what that means. Next thing, he'll have it all out of the chiefs — the mine — everything."

" No, no, Mr. Van! He can't find out. They don't know about what you and me — Nobody saw us — nobody. If there'd been a fresh track anywhere inside a quarter-mile, I couldn't have missed it."

Vandervyn shrugged. " I'm not so sure of that. You are not a full-blood tracker. But what if that is covered? It's bad enough. As soon as he finds out about the mine, he will kick the whole bunch of us off the Reservation. That's the kind of fool he is."

" He can't put me off. You told him yourself. I'm a member of the tribe."

" Yes, and Jake is a member by marriage.

Lots of good that will do you both—in the guardhouse."

Redbear cringed at the word. "But my sister— He won't put *me* in."

"Wait and see when he finds out how things have been going here. He hasn't forgotten your share in the beef deal. Let him find out anything more against you, and it's Charlie in the jug, with his job gone glimmering."

The halfbreed looked up, his eyes desperate, his face set in the grin of a cornered rat. He muttered a curse.

"That's it, boy!" encouraged Vandervyn. "Don't lay down. We're with you. But remember, we've got to make a bluff. It's up to us to bluff him off, or throw down."

"Bluff *him*? You didn't see him stand up to those punchers."

"Three are considerably less than a tribe."

"Tribe?"

"Yes, a whole tribe of ki-yi-ing red devils desirous of dressing his hair."

"I don't understand, Mr. Van."

"Here it is, then. He doesn't know a word of Lakotah. The tribe doesn't know English. You are the interpreter. Get that?"

Redbear shook his head. "No, I don't."

"Yes, you do, Charlie. We've already told Hardy that there is a lot of bad blood stirred up. It will be easy to translate the talk of the chiefs that way. You can start in by telling them

how he pacified the Moros. He killed nearly as many of them as there are members of this tribe. The chiefs he put in jail. All the rest he moved to another island—you can say, to another Reservation."

"But if that is a lie—"

"It isn't. It's exactly what happened. The Moro head chief was kept in jail until he was hung. Be sure to tell that to old Thunderbolt. If it fails to warm him—"

"*Hoganny-hunk!*" gasped Redbear. "They once put him in jail for a week. If I tell him, it will make him fighting mad."

"That's what we want. I'll post you to interpret what he says, in a way that will get Hardy's goat. No man has nerve enough to stand up to a whole tribe. He will have to quit. Then the job comes to me. You know what that means."

"You promised me a full share."

"Yes, and that means a third of the net proceeds, now that Nogen is out of the way. Only, remember, you get nothing—none of us gets a cent more out of it—if Hardy stays. It's up to you now, Charlie. You turn the trick and get your share; or you fall down, lose share and job, and go to the guardhouse—on your way to the Federal penitentiary. Which is it to be?"

Redbear's rat-like grin had changed to the grimace of a rabid coyote. "Curse him!" he snarled. "I'll make him run clean to town."

"Good boy!" praised Vandervyn. "Had your

breakfast? Yes? Then trot up to the Agency and pass the time of day to the chiefs as they come in. It will help things along to post them beforehand. Don't forget that Hardy is a cold-hearted army martinet who despises Indians. He is planning to stop all issue goods, and intends to punish the chiefs for the killing of Nogen. But if he leaves the Reservation, I become the agent. I will make no trouble over Nogen, and will see that the Government keeps giving issue goods to the tribe for a long time. That's the talk. Now trot along and get them screwed up."

"Oinna?" said Redbear.

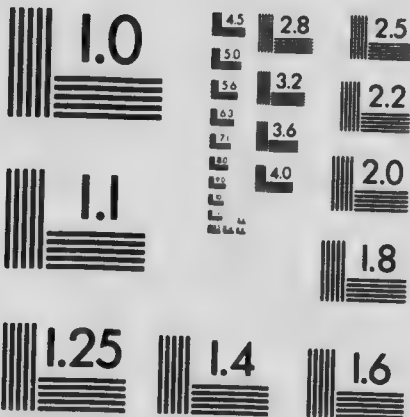
"Don't waste time going back," replied Vandervyn. "I'm riding down to see if Dupont's punchers have left with the herd for the Jones outfit. I'll stop and tell your sister not to expect you home until after the council. Get busy—Wait. We can work in the police. Tell them they are ordered to wait at the guardhouse until the council is under way. They are then to march around and post themselves behind Hardy, fully armed. If the chiefs get angry, they are to close up around Hardy. Are you on?"

Redbear responded with an eager nod, and started off at a jog trot. Vandervyn smiled, turned his pony about, and rode back to the cabin. The door was closed. Without dismounting, he reached down and knocked. The knock was twice repeated before the door opened a scant inch and Oinna peeped out at the visitor. Vandervyn at



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once pointed over the cabin in the direction of the Agency.

"'Lo," he said in an indifferent tone. "I brought word to your brother that he was wanted at once. Told him I would let you know. He will not be home until after the council."

"Thank you, sir," murmured the girl.

"No trouble at all," replied Vandervyn. "I was riding down the valley, anyway. You don't happen to have a drink of good water handy, do you? Sioux Creek drains too many camps to be safe drinking."

Instinctive hospitality overcame the girl's shyness. Her tall young figure and handsome face appeared as the door swung open.

"I boil the water. Do you like tea?" she asked in a flute-like voice.

"All right."

She stepped about. He swung down and peered into the rude, half-finished interior of the cabin. The girl took a coffee-pot from the little stove and reached for one of the large granite-ware cups on the bare shelf.

"Sugar — and cream?" she asked.

When at school she must have caught the intonation of the stock question from some cultured Eastern teacher. Vandervyn stopped midway through the entrance and stepped back outside. He replied in a conventional tone: "Clear, please."

When she returned to the door, he was tight-

ening his saddle-girth. He kept her waiting several moments before he turned to take the cup of tea. The hand that held the cup was rough from hard work, but the girl's cheap calico dress was neat and clean and it covered a form as supple and erect as a reed. Unlike her brother, she had inherited only the good features of her parents. The blend of types apparent in her face was far from unpleasing.

She kept her soft brown eyes shyly downcast. Yet she must have watched him covertly through her long lashes. Under his stare of bold admiration the color beneath her olive skin deepened until she was scarlet with bashful embarrassment. The tea was hot. He sipped it slowly and gloated on the girl's confusion. Aside from Marie, she was the only comely girl he had seen in half a year, with the exception of women passengers glimpsed through Pullman car windows during his infrequent trips to the railroad.

Unable longer to endure the strain, Oinna at last faltered in timid desperation: "You — you are Mr. Van. Charlie — he said you and he — are partners."

"Partners?" repeated Vandervyn with a quick frown. "He said that?"

The girl shrank back. "Please, sir, he didn't mean anything wrong."

"What more did he say?"

"Nothing — only that. Please, it's only his way of talking."

"That's all right. Don't be afraid," Vandervyn reassured her with a quick change to smiling friendliness. "I am Charlie's best friend. He has got himself in bad with the new agent. But if he keeps his mouth shut, I shall be able to help him out."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! He is my only brother. We have nobody else; only ourselves."

In her gratitude the girl forgot her self-consciousness. She raised her soft eyes and looked full at Vandervyn. He smiled and bent nearer. Though she blushed scarlet, she was unable to turn her gaze away from his ardent blue eyes. She had the look of one who is afraid and wishes to flee yet at the same time wishes to stay. Her hands pressed together over her fluttering heart. In her wide eyes and half-parted lips he read the confession of her artless young soul.

"O-ee-nah," he drew out her name in the caressing tone that he would have used in fondling a pet dog.

She smiled even as she trembled. He came closer. Her gaze wavered and sank before the look in his glowing eyes, and she shrank back. He sought to put his arm about her, but she sprang clear with the agility of a startled doe.

"Oh, come now!" he urged. "Just a kiss. What's the harm of a kiss?"

The girl had retreated into the cabin. He blocked the door. There was no way for her to elude him if he wished to press his vantage.

"No, no, please!" she begged. "At school they told me only bad girls let men kiss them."

"*Bah!*" he scoffed. "What do those old fossils know about it?" His voice deepened to an alluring richness. "Come. I will not hurt you, Oinna. Give me a kiss."

"Let me — let me out!" she panted.

"Not unless you pay toll."

She looked around for some way of escape. There was none. The windows were small and high. Yet she ran to the one that faced up the valley. He stepped inside the cabin to bar the door. She stared wildly out through the window and then looked at him over her shoulder. The sudden stillness of her pose checked and disquieted him. Was it possible that she had seen her brother returning?

He sprang outside and around to the corner of the cabin. A short distance away he saw Marie Dupont riding across from the road at a smart canter. He waved his hat to her and faced about just as Oinna was gliding from the door.

"Stop!" he called in a tone that forced the girl to obey. "Don't be silly, Oinna. You have my word for it I meant no harm. If you run now, Miss Dupont will think we have been doing something wrong."

"Oh, I don't want her to. She was good to me. Don't let her think bad of me," implored the girl.

"Then go in and get her a cup of tea. Quick — here she comes."

The girl disappeared as Marie's pony swung around the corner of the cabin. Vandervyn stooped to fiddle with his stirrup leather. He straightened, and looked over his pony's back. Marie had pulled up a few feet away, and was staring past him towards the door of the cabin, her cheeks ablaze and her eyes flashing with anger.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, glancing over his shoulder with well-feigned surprise. "What's the matter?"

"You ask that?" she cried. "I met Charlie half-way to the Agency. He said you were riding out of the valley."

"Yes. Stopped here to get a drink from his sister. They have only creek water. I've had to wait while she boiled some for tea. But it was a lucky delay — you're here. You'll ride with me?"

"I wish to speak to that girl," replied Marie.

"Going to hire her for kitchen maid?" he asked, and he called over his shoulder in a rough tone: "Hurry up in there. You're keeping Miss Dupont waiting."

"You should not speak that way to Oinna. She is not a dog," reproved Marie. "See; you have frightened her — It's all right, Oinna. Mr. Van didn't mean to be cross."

The girl had stopped in the doorway, her eyes

timidly downcast. Without looking up, she came around to Marie and offered her the cup of lukewarm tea that she had brought in obedience to Vandervyn's command. Marie took a sip and paused to peer down into the dark brew.

"*Merci!*" she cried. "It is half sugar."

"You were good to me," naïvely explained Oinna.

Marie laughed and handed back the offering.

"You child! Drink it yourself. I can guess how few sweets you've had at school. Come on, Reggie."

Vandervyn mounted, and their ponies started off on a lope. The young man kept his eyes to the front. But Marie soon glanced about.

"Look!" she said.

He turned and saw Oinna with the big granite-ware cup to her uptilted lips, draining the moist sugar from the bottom. The action was laughably childish, but the girl's attitude was the perfection of grace. Marie caught the look that flitted across Vandervyn's face, and her eyes flashed.

"So I was right!" she exclaimed. "You were flirting with her."

"I—flirting with her?" he wonderingly queried, and he turned sideways in his saddle, to stare wide-eyed at his companion, from the tip of her dainty riding-boot up to the feathered felt hat on her coal-black hair.

Under that prolonged scrutiny the scarlet of the girl's anger changed to rose, and her eyes

sank as coyly as had Oinna's. He smiled. The girl was good to look upon. Even in New York or Washington her rich beauty would have been notable. Here it was enough to set throbbing the pulse of men far less warm-blooded than Reginald Vandervyn. Reared in the saddle, she sat her pony with the ease and grace of a perfect horsewoman, and though she rode astride, her costume was as modest as it was becoming.

"You're looking tiptop this morning," he complimented her.

Her blush deepened, and her lips parted as had Oinna's. But she was less naïve than the younger girl; she was careful not to let him see the look in her eyes. She began to talk about Hardy, the beef herd, the council—about everything and anything. He smiled and followed her leads, and feasted his eyes on her beauty.

They rode out on the open plain to where the beef herd was grazing. The Indian herders had seen nothing of Dupont's punchers. The couple returned into the valley.

Mid-morning was past when they walked their ponies up the slope of the terrace. The bare level, back of the warehouse, was dotted with groups of stolid, half-naked Indians.

"Look!" exclaimed the girl.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Don't you see? There is not a woman or child among them. Let us go and find out what *Père* thinks of it."

CHAPTER IX

THUNDERBOLT

BUT Dupont was not at home. When they failed to find him either in the store or the living-rooms, Marie stepped to the door for another look at the Indians, and then calmly went in to prepare a noon dinner.

Vandervyn sauntered over to the office. On the way he observed Redbear, out back of the warehouse, drifting unobtrusively from one group of Indians to another. Hardy was at his desk in the office, intent on the Government treaty with the tribe.

At noon, as the head chief of the tribe had not yet arrived, Hardy and Vandervyn started to go for their midday meal. As they rounded Hardy's cabin, they were overtaken by Dupont, who came from the direction of the stable. His face was as stolid as the faces of the chiefs and headmen among whom he had passed.

"Well, Jake, what's the good word?" inquired Vandervyn.

The trader gloomily shook his head. "Ain't none, Mr. Van. No women, no children, no old men — just bucks. No trading — I been over to

the p'leece camp. Ponies all in; tepees down. They're gitting ready to slip down creek."

"Do you mean they expect trouble?" asked Hardy.

"Well, it kind of looks that way," answered Dupont. "Wish Marie had stayed over at town. But she wouldn't hear of it— Too late now. She can't go alone. You won't go with her, and if me or Mr. Van pulled out, hell sure would be popping."

"Explain," ordered Hardy.

"You remember I told you there was a lot of bad blood stirred up. Them there chiefs and headmen are feeling mighty bad in their hearts. Me and Charlie been trying our level best to smooth 'em down, but they're ornery. It all turns on whether Thunderbolt feels the same— That's old Ti-owa-konza, the head chief. If he's feeling bad, we better look out. He's one of the kind like my woman's red *grandpère*— old Sitting Bull."

"I regret that your daughter came back here," said Hardy. "Yet I am confident there will be no trouble. We have only to find out the cause of the ill feeling and remove it."

"If it can be removed," qualified Vandervyn.

"Better figure on letting the warehouse go and piling into my place, Cap, if they start to ki-yi," suggested Dupont. "I'll show you how I got it all loopholed. Water inside and a lot of grub and ammunition—we can hold it ag'in

the whole tribe, if the p'leece don't go back on us."

"They will not, nor will there be any outbreak," insisted Hardy. "Do not needlessly alarm your daughter."

"Can't scare *her*," grunted Dupont.

They were now almost at the house porch. Marie appeared in the doorway, aglow with animation.

"Good day, Captain Hardy. I fear we had breakfast too early for you. *Père*, you look sober as an owl. You can't be afraid of an outbreak. What if they do turn loose? I have everything ready—all the loopholes opened and the meat brought in from the icehouse. It will keep in the cellar."

Hardy followed the others into the parlor, and looked at the slots cut through the wall paper to expose the loopholes, from which the chinks had been removed.

"Miss Dupont," he said, "you are a very brave young lady."

"Yes, it took courage to cut my wall paper," she replied.

"And all for nothing, I feel sure," he declared.

"Well, it's best to be ready, in case," muttered Dupont.

The girl's eyes sparkled. "I wouldn't mind a day or two of fighting. What fun it must have been in the old days!"

"Fun?" exclaimed Vandervyn.

"I have no doubt we could defend the house," remarked Hardy. "If the families of the police are going down the valley, some member would be certain to carry the news to the railroad, in the event of an uprising. We could hold out until the arrival of troops. But there will be no uprising, no trouble."

"Oh, Captain!" protested Marie.

They passed on into the dining-room, where the silent Indian boy at once served dinner. It was a plain family meal. But the china and plated ware were artistic, the table linen was clean, and the food very well cooked.

Dupont was still gormandizing when Redbear came with the news that Ti-owa-konza had at last reached the Agency. The halfbreed looked so worried that Vandervyn rose from the table as quickly as Hardy. Dupont paused with a slice of pumpkin pie upraised in his hand.

"What's the rumpus, Charlie?" he asked. "Old Thunderbolt ain't gone on the warpath, has he?"

"No, he looks quiet now. But one of the headmen told me he said he would wipe out the Agency if the new agent didn't do what he wanted."

Dupont muttered one of the two oaths ever ready on his tongue: "*Nom d'un chien!* Cap, you sure ain't going to risk all our scalps by bucking his game?"

"I shall see what he wants, and then do what

"I consider right," replied Hardy. "Miss Dupont, I ask you to take the buckboard and start at once for the railroad. You can call past for Redbear's sister."

"No, she don't," interposed Dupont. "It's too late."

"It is not too late for your daughter to escape if she rides my mare."

"That is most kind of you, Captain," said the girl. "But I prefer to stay. I do not wish to miss the fun. Besides, I will not leave *Père*."

Hardy did not press the point. "Very well—if you stay close indoors. May I ask you to have your Indian boy take my mare down to Redbear's sister, with orders for her to escape if she hears any firing? Mr. Vandervyn, you may remain here or join myself and Redbear, as you prefer."

"I'll go along with you, Captain. You may have to fight your way back here."

Hardy nodded in approbation of the spirited reply, bowed to Marie, and started for the Agency buildings with a step that was brisk yet dignified. The Indians had assembled for the council in a semicircle, three rows deep, facing the rear of the warehouse. Hardy went first to his cabin, where he "broke" his rifle and put a piece of the mechanism into his pocket.

"There shall be no display of weapons on our part," he ordered. "You will not take your

rifles. At close quarters your revolvers will be more effective. Carry them concealed."

"We will put on coats," said Vandervyn. "Come to my cabin."

"Meet me at the office," directed Hardy, and he walked on ahead, cool and resolute.

The others soon rejoined him, Redbear in an old shooting-jacket, and Vandervyn in a frock coat and tile, to Hardy reminiscent of smart society, but to the Indians emblematic of paleface dignity. When the little party came around the end of the warehouse to take up their position before the silently awaiting assembly, the covert glances of the many beadlike eyes first turned upon the chief clerk. Soon, however, they shifted to the erect military figure of the new agent, and remained fixed.

The Indian police, fully armed, started to file out of the guardhouse. Hardy waved them back, and seated himself on the chair that Redbear had brought from the office. The police poured out of their quarters, but obeyed the gestured order by remaining in front of the door. With a calm, direct gaze, Hardy studied the appearance of the triple row of Indians. In all, nearly a hundred of the tribe's leading men had come to meet in council with the new agent.

To an inexperienced eye the rows of stolid, silent redskins could not have appeared more peaceably disposed. Their faces were unpainted. They squatted or sat on the dusty ground, huddled

in their blankets, betraying nothing of their thoughts either by look or movement or word. But Hardy's keen eyes noted that there were no weapons on the ponies, which were being held in readiness for their owners by young bucks a few paces in the rear of the semicircle. The blankets of some of the men in the rear rows were hunched out over well-filled quivers of arrows. Here and there on the ground beside the sub-chiefs who formed the front row a muzzle of a rifle thrust from under the outspread blanket ends.

Hardy gave no sign that he saw these evidences of hostile feeling. Having looked at the entire assembly, he fixed his gaze on Thunderbolt, who sat in the center of the row of sub-chiefs. There was no need for Redbear to point out the head chief. The innate dignity and noble bearing of the white-haired leader of the tribe would have distinguished him from the lesser chiefs even if he had not sat in the place of honor. Alone of all his fellows he stared back at the agent with nothing furtive in his gaze.

After a deliberative silence that accorded with the Indian idea of etiquette, Hardy spoke to Redbear: "Tell them that I am pleased to meet in council with the head chief and sub-chiefs and headmen of the tribe. I am here to find out what has troubled the tribe and to see whatever is wrong shall be made right."

Redbear glanced at Vandervyn, who stood behind Hardy. The eyes of the chief clerk nar-

rowed, and his small red mouth straightened. Redbear drew in a quick breath, faced about, and addressed the assembly. What he said took several moments to deliver. Not one of all the Indians moved, yet there was a sudden change perceptible in their manner—an unmistakable tensing of attention. Scores of hard black eyes shot furtive glances at the new agent.

The hush that followed seemed to quiver with suppressed hostility, though the faces of the Indians remained stolid, and not one of all their number so much as grunted his displeasure. At last old Ti-owa-konza rose to reply. His tone and bearing were mild. He first spoke soothingly to his fellow councilors, and then addressed Hardy in dignified remonstrance. When he sat down again, Redbear stood silent, uneasy and vacillating.

“ Interpret,” ordered Hardy.

“ I — I — it isn’t easy. You mightn’t like it,” mumbled the halfbreed.

“ Never mind that. Proceed.”

“ Well, it’s not easy to get it just the same,” hesitated Redbear. He glanced at Vandervyn, licked his lips, and began:

“ He says all this land belongs to the tribe; that the white man has no business here. He says that he is not sorry Mr. Nogen was killed, but he is sorry that you have come here. He says his people do not like the Longknives, who used to kill them, and they do not want you for agent,

because you are a chief of the Longknives. He says they like Mr. Van, and they want him to be their agent."

Unseen by his superior, Vandervyn nodded encouragingly to Redbear and smiled at the Indians. Hardy had not turned his steady gaze from Ti-owa-konza.

"The chief is not angry," he said. "We shall soon be friends. Tell him that I come in peace, with a good heart towards all the tribe. I do not blame the killing of Mr. Nogen on the tribe. If white men have done any wrong to the tribe, I shall stop the wrongdoing; I am here as the friend of the tribe. But if there are any members of the tribe who are doing wrong, I must make them do right. The chiefs should help me make all do right. If any member of the tribe joined in the killing of Mr. Nogen, the chiefs should deliver him up to me."

This time Redbear did not hesitate. He faced the assembly and rolled out a flood of Lakotah with desperate rapidity. Before he had half finished, many of the younger headmen dropped their stolid masks to scowl upon the new agent, and guttural ejaculations burst from the lips of even some of the chiefs. Almost immediately Ti-owa-konza rose to reply, his face ablaze with indignation, his voice impassioned. When he had spoken, he remained standing.

"He says he is angry," began Redbear.

"No," brusquely contradicted Hardy. "Look

at his face. The others are angered. He is not. There is some misunderstanding. Be careful that you interpret correctly."

"He says he is angry," insisted Redbear, his sidelong glance looking past Hardy to Vandervyn, who was nodding reassuringly. "He says he is trying to keep it inside, but the others can't hold it inside. They do not feel good in their hearts towards the chief of the Longknives. He says the Longknives drove them away from their hunting-grounds and killed them, while the other white men killed all the buffaloes. He says they do not like you. He says that if you do not go away he can't keep his young men from making trouble. He says you have got to go away or there will be fighting."

Hardy straightened on his chair, and his look became severe. He spoke sharply: "Tell the chief it is useless to ask me to go away. The great White Father in Washington ordered me to come here and make peace in the tribe. I cannot go away until my great chief sends for me. It is foolish to talk of trouble and fighting. I do not wish to send for the Longknives. But they will come and fight the tribe if there is any uprising."

Redbear's interpretation was followed by a hush more threatening than gestures or outcries. Vandervyn hastily beckoned to the policemen. They came along under the overhang of the warehouse until they were behind the white men.

Hardy heard the soft scuffle of their moccasined feet in the dust. He looked around and frowned.

"How is this?" he demanded. "I signed to them to remain at their quarters."

"I presume they think matters are getting warm," said Vandervyn. "It strikes me that Redbear has been toning down the old devil's threats."

"I particularly wished no demonstration of force," said Hardy.

"Well, since the police are here, hadn't you better let them stay? It will be close enough work if matters come to a scrap, and there's Marie out to see the fun."

Hardy turned around to look at the daring girl. She stood on a slight knoll midway between the assembled Indians and her father's cabin.

"Take her back to the house," he ordered.

"But would it be wise for me to leave you and Charlie alone just now? The police may not stay loyal if —"

"Go!"

The command was peremptory. Vandervyn started off, yet contrived to exchange glances with Redbear. Hardy studied the semicircle of waiting Indians with a resolute gaze, and, as before, fixed his attention upon Ti-owa-konza.

"We must learn what is the cause of this ill feeling," he remarked to the halfbreed. "Ask them why they are opposed to their young men trading ore for Dupont's goods."

Redbear spoke slowly to the Indians, his manner not unlike that of a man who approaches a barrel of gunpowder with a lighted torch. There was no explosion, but the old head chief flared with unmistakable anger. He replied with a fiery declamation that won grunts of approval from his fellows.

The halfbreed's voice was unsteady as he interpreted: "He — he says there shall be no more barter of ore. He says all over again that this is the land of his tribe, and white men have no right here, and he hates all Longknives."

"Tell him that he is mistaken. The soldiers have always been the best friends of the Indians. Warriors should understand and like each other. I wish to be a friend of the tribe. I have looked at the treaty between the tribe and the great White Father. I find that, after next Spring, no more food and goods are to be issued to the tribe. I wish the men of the tribe to dig ore and barter it, so that they may learn white men's ways. Sooner or later, white men will come and take the ore if the Indians do not dig it themselves. Another thing, I believe the tribe should agree to the dividing up of their land, so that each head of a family can have his own farm and work it after the manner of the white men. Other tribes have done this, and they are no longer poor."

Redbear hesitated, stepped more aside from Hardy, and began to pour out a torrent of Lakotah. He had spoken only a few sentences when

a wave of agitation passed over the semicircle of Indians. Blankets slipped down from copper-red shoulders; fierce eyes glared menacingly at Hardy. Several of the more excitable bucks leaped up with bow or rifle in hand.

Ti-owa-konza uttered a deep shout. All the chiefs and headmen sprang up, muttering guttural curses. Some raised their weapons. The police, unbidden, suddenly advanced and closed in around the cool, resolute officer. For a few seconds all was tumult and confusion. An outbreak seemed certain. The great majority of the Indians were furious. Ti-owa-konza shouted to them in impassioned tones.

Then Redbear's voice rose shrill and clear above the din. He cried out, evidently imploring peace. His hands waved in vehement sign-talk. Ti-owa-konza ceased his own outcry to listen. The uproar subsided as suddenly as it had burst out. Redbear continued to speak. Sullenly the furious redskins lowered their weapons. Redbear ceased speaking.

Hardy thrust out from among the police and raised his hands to Ti-owa-konza in the peace sign. The head chief called to his fellows and turned his back upon the agent with deliberate contempt. All the others faced about and followed him to the waiting ponies. The band mounted and rode off up the valley in morose silence.

CHAPTER X

THE COMMON LAW

THERE was still more than a trace of red in Hardy's sallow cheeks when Marie, Vandervyn, and Dupont came in upon him at the office. Dupont held out a congratulatory hand.

"By Gar, Cap," he said, "you sure had a mighty close squeak of it that time. I been talking to the p'leece. Guess old Ti got all-fired hot. Where's Charlie?"

"Take this chair, Miss Dupont. You'll find it more comfortable," courteously urged Hardy.

"Redbear? He is on his way home. I sent him to reassure his sister and the families of the police."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Captain," said Marie.

"But it would be far more considerate if you would leave the Reservation," added Vandervyn.

"How so?" queried Hardy.

"Of course, you'll fancy I am thinking of my promotion. But it's not that at all. Ask Jake. Didn't Charlie tell you what he had to promise in order to keep those red devils from raising the ki-yi?"

"No."

"I got it from the p'leece," said Dupont. "The whole bunch was yelling to shoot you; and they'd done it, too, the ornery cusses, only Charlie sings out to 'em that Mr. Van was going to be agent, and you'd go away."

"He said that?"

"Oh, Captain, don't be angry at Charlie," interceded Marie. "He had to do it to save a fight. I couldn't hear what was said, but I could see them. They were furious at you."

"But why? It perplexes me. I could not have been more friendly. Yet everything I said seemed to anger them."

"I told you they're a ornery bunch," replied Dupont. "Even at that, though, I'd be surprised at them flaring up so open, if it wasn't for because your being a officer. I clean forgot how the chiefs hate all soldiers like pizen. Most of the old ones was in the ghost-dance craze, and got jailed by the soldiers."

"Haven't I heard that an Indian who has been jailed always is vindictive?" inquired Vandervyn.

"By Gar, this here bunch is, you bet," answered Dupont. "Worst of it is they're not young bucks what don't count—they stand for the tribe. Let me tell you, when old Ti flares up and goes off sulky and the whole bunch of sub-chiefs and headmen follows suit, it's time to hunt cover."

"They may cool down and be willing to listen to reason," argued Hardy.

"Cool down? They'll go back and sit and stew and stew till hell boils over. Next thing happens, they'll stir up the young bucks. That'll mean first you; then, once they git started to killing, they'll clean up the rest of us. *Nom d'un chien!* Just when I was gitting enough ahead in my business to take care of my old age and give Marie a chance to be a lady — to stand to lose everything and her and my scalp, to boot! "

"You are free to leave here with her whenever you wish."

"No, I ain't. I can't leave my store — all my property."

"And I shall not leave unless *Père* does," said Marie. "You will not force me to leave him? "

"I must, if it becomes necessary," replied Hardy. "It is not right that you should be exposed to the danger of an uprising."

"But there would be no danger if it were not for you," she rejoined, her eyes flashing with indignation. "If only you had not come here! If there is an outbreak, it will be all your fault! "

"Mine? "

"Oh, I know you mean well. But if they've taken this violent dislike to you — Why ever did you come? You saw how they like Mr. Van. Had they thought you would insist on staying, nothing could have kept them from attacking you. But the promise that Mr. Van is to be their agent,

that pacified them. Had you never come here, all this would not have happened. The chiefs would have come to talk with Mr. Van, and would have gone back satisfied."

Hardy swung around in his chair to scrutinize the guileless face of Vandervyn.

"What do you say to that, sir?" he interrogated.

"What can I say?" replied Vandervyn, twisting the tip of his blond mustache. "You know that if I insist upon the advisability of your leaving, it will lay me open to the suspicion of self-interest. It is for you to decide to leave for the good of the tribe, or to stay and take the chance of an uprising."

"The way you put it —" considered Hardy. "Perhaps it might be better for —" concerned if I should leave."

"You bet it would, Cap," eagerly broke in Dupont. "'Tain't no joke. Them ornery cusses 'll git you like they done with Nogen, just as sure as shooting."

Vandervyn shot a furious glance at the blunderer. Marie was looking at Hardy. But she did not need to see the tightening of his lips to realize what her father had done.

"Oh, *Père!*" she reproached. "Why did you say it? You should have known Captain Hardy could not leave after that."

"Quite right, Miss Dupont," said Hardy.

"You mean, you won't leave?" asked Dupont.

"How can he?" Vandervyn smoothly cut in. "You've put it up to him that it would be deserting his post under fire. He's an army officer—he wouldn't leave now even if he knew his staying here meant certain massacre for us all, followed by certain massacre of the tribe by the troops."

"I will remain until I have made at least one more effort to pacify the tribe," replied Hardy. "You are at liberty to resign whenever you please. Mr. Dupont has ample time to remove his goods and his daughter from the Reservation."

"Not me," declared Marie. "I don't care what *Père* and Reggie say; I know there is not one of the tribe who would harm me, even in an outbreak."

"Well, mebbe not," admitted her father.

"I gather that I am the only person who seems to be endangered," remarked Hardy. "This being so, I will wait a few days for the excitement to subside, and will then call another council."

"They won't come ag'in to meet you," predicted Dupont.

"Then I shall go to them."

"Into the mountains, Captain?" exclaimed Marie, her splendid eyes widening with concern. "Surely you will not venture among the camps."

"The tribe must learn that I mean friendship."

Dupont paused to scratch the side of his head. But Vandervyn spoke without an instant's hesitancy: "You have no right to throw your life

away uselessly, Captain. Suppose Charlie and I make a trip to the camps, to see if we cannot quiet the tribe and talk the chiefs into giving you another hearing? If you have no objection, we could tell them that you cannot leave just now, but that you will do so as soon as you have tried to benefit them."

"And that Mr. Van'll be next agent," added Dupont.

"Will you tell them that I am here to help them and to be their friend?" queried Hardy.

"Trust me to put it to them strong, Captain," assured Vandervyn. "I know you'll play fair by resigning in my favor as soon as you have the tribe in hand."

"After I have done what I can to improve conditions among them," qualified Hardy.

"I do so hope Mr. Van can persuade them to be friendly with you," said Marie. "I know he and Charlie will be perfectly safe. But it will be hard to talk them out of their strange dislike to you. When will you start, Reggie?"

"Early to-morrow morning, if the captain has no objections."

"The sooner the better," agreed Hardy.

"I'll go and remove my council costume," said Vandervyn, smiling at his irreproachable frock coat.

Marie and her father rose with him. Hardy bowed out the girl and returned to his desk. He was deep in the midst of a report on the tribe

when, half an hour later, Vandervyn returned to the office in his riding-togs.

"Charlie may not come back this afternoon," he remarked. "I thought I might ride down and tell him about the trip. I could fetch your mare for you."

"Very well. I shall be obliged," replied Hardy, and he returned to his study of the report.

Vandervyn went down into the creek bottom, where one of the police was waiting with his pinto. He mounted and rode down along the far side of the stream, keeping the thickets as much as possible between himself and the Dupont house. He did not recross the creek until he was opposite Redbear's home.

When he rode over to the downstream side of the cabin, he found the door closed. But he noted a slight movement of the cheap madras curtains that had been hung in the nearest window. His hand went up to beckon with a lordly gesture. There was a short pause. Then the door opened a scant inch.

"Hello!" he said. "Where's your brother?"

"He has — has gone to tell the police families."

"On the agent's mare," guessed Vandervyn.

"Please — he didn't mean any harm — please don't tell on him."

"That depends," replied Vandervyn. "Do you think I care to favor him when you act as if you hate me?"

"Hate? No, no!" The door opened sev-

eral inches and as suddenly closed to a narrow crack.

But Vandervyn had caught a glimpse of the girl's blushing face. His voice dropped to a caressing tone: "You're not afraid of me, are you, just because I wanted a kiss? Come out here and talk. I won't bite you."

"You promise not to — to kiss me?"

"Not unless you wish me to."

"But — but I do!" came back the naïve confession.

Impulsively he started to swing off his pony. The cabin door shut with a bang. He straightened in the saddle, waited a long moment, frowned heavily, and started to ride away.

From the window came a plaintive cry: "Oh, please, please!"

He deliberately dismounted, flung the reins over his horse's head, and walked to the opened window. The eager, frightened face within blushed scarlet and shrank back. He stopped short.

"See here," he admonished, "if you're going to be silly, I shall go away for good. You've got the door barred, and you know I shall not try to crawl in at a hole like this."

"I — I won't be," she faltered.

"That's better," he said, and he reached in to slip his arm around her trembling shoulders.

Shrinking yet yielding, with eyes timidly downcast and olive cheeks burning with blissful shame, the young girl allowed him to draw her closer.

Her lips quivered, yet she raised them to meet his kiss.

"There!" he rallied. "Was it so dreadful?"

She did not answer; she could not. Her head drooped forward with the instinctive modesty of an innocent young girl. Had not the wall been between, she would have hidden her face on his shoulder. He put the forefinger of his free hand under her chin and raised her head to take a second kiss.

"One good turn deserves another, sweetheart," he said.

"You should not — not call me that," she whispered. "You are a gentleman white man; I am only a halfbreed."

"What of that? You're a sight prettier than most white girls."

"Oh, that can't be! I'm yellow as a Chinaman."

"No — golden. You are my golden girl. Your cheeks are wild roses and honey gold. Your eyes are like a fawn's; your lips sweet as honey. — Another kiss — There, that's more like it. You're learning how. Now look at me."

She did not look up, because she could not. He insisted. At last his urgency overcame her shyness. She raised her drooping lids with the sudden desperate courage of one who is very shy, and gazed up at him, her tender eyes starlike with the soft glow of her love and adoration.

"How about it now, Miss Young-lady-afraid-

of-her-beau? ” he bantered. “ Getting used to it, aren’t you? ”

“ You — you really like me? ” she whispered.

“ No, I hate you like Poor Lo hates fire-water. Give him a taste, and he wants it all. I want you.”

“ You mean, to be what white girls call engaged? ”

“ Well, we might call it that.”

“ Charlie — he said I must marry a white man. I am joyed in my heart — You say you want me! But I am only a halfbreed girl, and you — ” Her breath failed her in her awe of his condescension.

“ You’re my honey-sweet girlie. Go and open the door.”

She looked up at him again full and direct, and his gaze sank before the trust in her clear eyes.

“ You want me to be your engaged girl! ” she murmured. “ When people are engaged, they are going to be married. Charlie said I must marry a white man, a good white man. You are kind to me. It is wonderful. I have read that even army officers have married halfbreed girls. But you are grander than any officer, and you are very good to think of marrying me.”

Vandervyn forced a smile, and replied to her adulation without meeting her enraptured gaze:

“ What else did you think I meant when I kissed you? Of course we shall be married. As we are here on the Reservation, it will be according to the custom of the tribe.”

"Married? Oh, my heart sings!" cried the girl. "I will be your wife — yours! I can't believe it — There comes Charlie. I must run and tell him."

Vandervyn hastily released her, and drew his arm out of the window as he looked around.

"Wait!" he commanded. "He's coming fast enough. Leave the door barred."

"But he'll be so glad. Don't you — don't you want him to know?"

"Yes, if you're not silly. Stay right here." He waved to Redbear. "Stay here until he comes."

The halfbreed was racing Hardy's mare up the creek bank at a furious gallop. At Vandervyn's beckoning gesture he pulled in the thoroughbred to a less killing pace; but even at that, a few seconds brought him to the cabin. He flung himself out of the saddle and advanced upon Vandervyn, his face dark with suspicion.

"What you saying to my sister?" he demanded.

The white man met his threatening look with a half-contemptuous, half-amused smile.

"I've been showing the girl what I think of her," he replied.

Redbear came to a sudden halt. The muscles of his face began to twitch.

"Oh, Charlie!" reproached Oinna. "What makes you look at him that way? Why don't you thank him?"

"For what?" questioned her brother in a harsh, strained voice.

"Because he is going to be my man — going to take me for his wife."

Redbear stood dumfounded.

"Well?" asked Vandervyn. "Have you any objection to her marrying me?"

"Marry you? Oinna — you?" The half-breed could not believe his ears. Through his daze shot a flash of angry suspicion. "But you — you won't marry her!"

Vandervyn smiled in his careless manner.

"Oh, I guess yes."

"You'll marry her? You'll take her to town and marry her like white people?"

"I'll marry her as some white people marry. I'll not take her to town."

"You mean, you'll have the agent marry you?"

"Him?" exclaimed Vandervyn, his eyes instantly ugly with hate. "No, I wouldn't have him do it." He looked about and smiled at the startled girl in the window. She blushed and dropped her gaze in blissful confusion. He continued in a softer tone: "We don't need old Hardy. Oinna and I have agreed to be married according to tribal custom."

Again Redbear's weak face darkened with suspicion and anger. "I won't have it. You shan't do it, Oinna! It's not real marrying."

"You don't say?" rallied Vandervyn. "Then none of the Indians of this tribe are married?"

"They are, but it's Indian fashion. You're white, and Oinna is half white. White people don't marry Indian fashion."

"How about Mr. Dupont? His wife was a halfbreed."

"That was a long time ago. It's different now."

"You know a lot about it, Charlie. Haven't you ever heard of common-law marriages? Lots of white people get married that way."

"What way?"

"You must know about it. Instead of going to a lot of fuss and bother over ministers and licenses, many people just take each other for husband and wife and go to house-keeping."

"Is — is that a real white people's marriage?" asked Oinna.

Vandervyn frowned. "You don't think I'm lying, do you? Why, you often see in the newspapers about common-law wives getting their share of their dead husbands' estates, just the same as if they had gone through all the fuss of weddings. Ask Hardy if that does not often happen."

"Well, if it's a real marriage —" muttered Redbear.

"Of course it is, Charlie, if *he* says so!" cried Oinna rapturously.

Her brother's face glowed with sudden unconcealed exultance. He stammered almost incoher-

ently: "Then you — Marie — you don't marry — don't marry Marie."

"No," replied Vandervyn, and his voice rang clear. "I have no intention of marrying her."

"But she's wonderfully beautiful — ever so much grander than me," murmured Oinna.

"She's too confounded bossy and spoiled to be my wife. You're the girl I want, and I'm going to have you."

"Maybe Marie'll like me now, when I tell her you are going to be my brother," sighed Redbear.

Vandervyn laid a brotherly hand on his shoulder. "Hold on, boy!" he said. "You let me manage things. You know that Marie thinks she likes me. But now Hardy is here, and he wants her. If she hears that I have thrown her over, she will run off with him."

"She don't like him."

"What if she does n't! He's an army officer. He has money, and when he goes from here he will wear his uniform, all gilt and spangles. You know how the girls like that. No — I tell you there's not the ghost of a show for you until he is out of the way. Our little bluff didn't work. He says he is going to stay. So for a while you and Oinna must keep still about the marriage. Tomorrow morning you and I are going into the mountains to talk with the chiefs. Oinna will go with me. But it must be understood at the Agency that you have sent her to — Who could you send her to?"

"Ti-owa-konza is our mother's father. Not even Mr. Dupont knows that," said Redbear. "Before he came here, she ran off with a bad white man. They went to the Blackfeet. When Oinna was coming, her man kicked her out of his tepee and took a young squaw. After a time he got an arrow through his back. My mother came home. Ti-owa-konza would not see her face. She had to work for the agent till they made us go away to school. Then she died."

"Old Thunderbolt your grandfather?" remarked Vandervyn, seizing upon that one fact in the squalid tragedy. "Does he know it?"

"I told him today. He said my face — But maybe he will come to like me. He said to bring Oinna for him to look at her."

"That's great! We'll tell it to everybody. But remember, not a word about the marriage until after we get rid of Hardy and I am agent. Then things will go all right for all of us. You savvy that, Charlie? Unbar the door, honey-girl. While Charlie rubs down the mare I'll come in and say good-bye until tomorrow morning."

Blushing with delight, the girl ran to admit her lover into the cabin. Redbear brought the mare close before the door, where he could look in as he groomed her sleek coat. Vandervyn cut short his wooing and came out, angry-eyed.

"Guess you want to get down to business," he snapped. "All right. Come along a ways with me. I've got something to tell you." His voice

dropped to a deep, rich note as he peered back into the cabin: "Never mind, honey-girl. Tomorrow we'll begin our honeymoon."

Turning again, he hastened to mount his pony. Redbear was already on the thoroughbred. They rode off at a jog trot.

The sun had set when the halfbreed came back home, his feet leaden, his eyes furtive. Before he entered the cabin he set his face in a forced smile and quickened his step. But he need not have troubled. His sister did not notice his expression. Her hands were busy preparing the supper, but her thoughts were lost in the maze of an iridescent daydream. The grand and noble and beautiful young white man had chosen to love and honor her, the poor halfbreed girl. It was wonderful! Her heart was overflowing with love and reverence and worship of his goodness.

CHAPTER XI

BEST-LAID SCHEMES

HARDY had gone to the Duponts' for supper when Vandervyn returned to the Agency. He made a hasty toilet and followed. Marie met him with marked coldness. This, however, melted before he had finished his report to Hardy that he had been compelled to ride out of the valley in search of Redbear.

He said that the halfbreed had found the families of the police camped off the Reservation at the spring on the coulée side of the butte. He added that in the morning he was going alone to the first Indian camp. Redbear was to start ahead very early with his sister, that he might arrange to send her ahead to old Thunderbolt.

After this explanation Marie beamed upon Vandervyn, in the best of humor, while he went on to tell about the relationship between the Redbears and Ti-owa-konza. All agreed that the old chief probably would take a fancy to Oinna, and that, as a result, there would be a fair chance of pacifying the tribe. Vandervyn left the discussion of this to Hardy and Dupont, and proceeded to make himself agreeable to Marie.

When Hardy turned to the girl, he found her and Vandervyn exchanging glances and murmuring remarks the meaning of which was easy to divine. They made a charming picture — the splendidly beautiful girl, coy and rosy-cheeked, the fair-haired young man, ardent-eyed and gallant.

Hardy's habitual gravity softened to a smile of wistful sadness. At the first opportunity he excused himself and rose to leave. Vandervyn spared him a mocking smile. Marie accepted his excuses with a courteous phrase and vague smile, and promptly forgot him as she bent to catch a soft whisper from her lover.

Midnight had passed before the light in the little citified parlor of the Dupont house was extinguished.

When, at sunrise, Hardy went over for breakfast, he found that Vandervyn had already eaten and ridden away up the valley. Marie's eyes were very bright and the lids slightly swollen, and her look was pensive. She came to the table with her father and Hardy, but she ate little, and her manner towards Hardy was cold and ungracious.

After the officer left, Dupont squinted across the table at her and began to scratch his head.

"What made you act that way to him?" he ventured.

"What way — to whom?" she indifferently replied.

"Why, to him. You don't never think of me."

"Don't I?" The girl leaned forward, with her chin on her palm, and fixed a curious, half-wondering look on her father. "So you fancy I never think of you, *mon père*? Yet I came back here to be with you — from Ottawa, back here."

"You couldn't have done nothing else, when I thought you'd had enough schooling."

"That is all you know about it. I could have gone to England, the wife of a wealthy man."

"What! You never told me that."

"Do you tell me everything? He was gray at the temples, and I did not love him. You were my dear old *père*, all alone out here, and I loved you." The girl's bosom heaved at the word; the black lashes veiled her glorious eyes. "Love! What is life without love?"

"You and Mr. Van burned a lot of coal oil last night. He didn't git far enough along to ask you to hitch up with him, did he?"

A red blush flamed in the girl's cheeks. Without looking up, she murmured a regretful "No."

"Guess he figures he'll wait and see if Hardy is going to bust us up. Like as not he'll skip back East if Hardy gits sore and chokes off our hold on the mine."

"What do you mean? He can't send Reggie away. The stiff, solemn old foggy — I hate him!"

"Easy, easy, girl!" soothed Dupont. "No use plunging when you're hitched to the snubbing-post. Just now he's got us roped. He'll

have us all hog-tied if we go to bucking. We've got to make him think we're gentled."

"What if we act towards him as we feel?"

"You don't savvy about that mine. Me and Nogen discovered it and paid honest for developing it, as you know. Well, we 'et Mr. Van in on it. Then Nogen up and gits killed. That makes it half and half between me and Mr. Van, according to all that's fair and square. But do you believe Hardy will look at it that way? Not by a—considerable. He'll talk about it being the tribe's, just because it's on the Reservation."

"I see!" The girl's eyes flashed, and her nostrils dilated. "He will rob you and Reggie of a fortune—yet you wish me to be nice to him!"

"You bet I do! Can't you git the point? He ain't going to be bluffed into quitting. We tried to—we thought sure he'd skip out when the council got riled so bad. But he sure has got sand."

"He is no braver than Reggie."

"Well, I don't know about that. Anyway, he's not going to quit. He stays the agent. That means we got to make friends with him or lose the mine."

"Oh! So that is it?"

"Yep. Worst of it is he's one of them there fellows what stand so straight they lean backwards. We talked to him about how it would help the tribe if he joined us in opening the mine.

He was mighty offish. Guess we'll have to give him Nogen's third to git him into our camp."

"What a shame! The mine is yours and Reggie's. He hasn't done a thing towards developing it."

"I know. But he's the agent. He's got us roped. He can rob us of our mine if we don't make friends with him. Now do you savvy?"

The girl's thick black eyebrows met in a frown of vexation. "If he is a man whose friendship must be bought, I do not wish to be pleasant to him."

"It's business, Marie. There ain't no two ways about it. Mr. Van's hanging fire, a-waiting to see if we lose the mine. If we do, he can't afford to marry no poor girl off a Reservation."

"Very well. I shall make myself agreeable to Captain Hardy. But wait until I am free to pay him out for it!"

"*Nom d'un chien!*" muttered Dupont at sight of her straightened lips. "That's the Injin in you. Don't let him see you look that way till after we git the mine cinched."

"I am not a fool, *mon père*."

Dupont shook his grizzled head dubiously.

But at midday, when Hardy came over for the noon dinner, Marie received his courteous greeting with a graciousness that soon lightened the pensive severity of his look. Before the end of the meal they were chatting in a manner that brought a twinkle into Dupont's cunning eyes.

The girl proposed a ride up the valley. Hardy was greatly pleased. He had already grasped the simple details of the Agency business, and now, pending the absence of Vandervyn and Redbear, had nothing to do except instruct the police in his ideas of cleanliness and discipline.

Marie never looked more charming than when on a horse. She took her new friend for a long ride around one of the mountains. Every cliff and rock and piney slope was familiar to her. She pointed out all the grandest and most beautiful views, and showed herself even better versed in the lore of the wild than she had seemed to be posted on the culture and graces of polite society.

Hardy was not a nature worshiper. But he had a keen appreciation of beauty and grandeur of all kinds. He enjoyed the scenery very much and his beautiful, vivacious companion still more. His pleasure was unmistakably apparent despite his habitual reserve. For all his super-soldierly stiffness, his every look and act and word tended to prove him a gentleman in the highest sense of the term.

During supper Marie became a trifle less animated. At the table and afterwards in the parlor, she shifted most of the conversation upon her father and Hardy. In his desire to be agreeable, Dupont only succeeded in displaying his innate coarseness. He roared with laughter over pointless anecdotes and stale witticisms, and annoyed

his guest with insistent invitations to sample the whisky. Hardy met all with genial courtesy; he deftly turned aside the conversation from *risque* subjects, and never once betrayed a trace of repulsion or disgust.

After Marie bowed him out she went at once to her bedroom without responding to her father's half-maudlin good-night. Her face was very thoughtful.

The next day she was so cool and distant in her manner towards Hardy that her father protested. She listened with a docility that surprised him. His arguments seemed to convince her, for the following morning she was almost as gracious, though not so vivacious, with Hardy as on the first day. After that there was no break in her friendly manner towards the captain for several days. Frequently they took other rides, over or around the nearest hills and mountains.

Vandervyn had arranged to be gone a week. There was no cause to discuss the time of his return, and as Marie seldom mentioned him, Hardy was not often annoyed by the vision of the handsome young fellow interposing between himself and the girl.

From day to day it could plainly be seen how the rides in the pure mountain air and the delight of the girl's companionship were bringing back strength and vigor to the officer's tropic-weakened body. Soon a healthy red appeared under the tan of his cheeks. The lines of

severity and repressed grief began to smooth away.

On the morning of the seventh day, when he rode over to join Marie for a ride out to the butte on Wolf River, ten years seemed to have dropped from him. Even when he lifted his hat to the girl and exposed the silvered hair at his temples, he looked nearer twenty-five than thirty. He had shaved off his bristly grizzled mustache!

"Positively, Captain," she bantered, "you startle me. You are growing so young! First thing I know, I shall be feeling myself a grandmother in contrast."

"Impossible," he gallantly replied. "You are the Spirit of Youth. Being with you is what makes me seem so much younger than I am. Yet I shall never see thirty-two again."

"You're barely of age this morning!" she said, smiling at his shapely clean-shaven lip.

"In that case you must humor my callowness by pretending you need my aid to mount."

As she did not demur to the suggestion, he led up her half-broken young calico pony. She smiled in her most ladylike manner and put one small booted foot in his hand. Between her own agility and his expert assistance, she rose with the lightness of a feather and perched herself sideways on her man's saddle. Unused to such strange behavior, the pony began to buck.

Hardy sprang to seize the beast by the head. Marie waved him aside, and proceeded to give

THE QUARTERBREED

an impromptu exhibition of her skill as a horse-woman. Though the pony was a mild bucker as horses go in the West, most women would have left his back, whether seated in a sidesaddle or astride. With one knee crooked around the horn of her saddle, Marie kept her difficult seat like a circus rider, until the pony subsided.

"You've ridden to hounds," stated Hardy as the girl swung astride and they started off down the valley.

She smiled with gratification. "Reggie never notices such things; but you — The first time I saw a sidesaddle I thought it ridiculous. I do yet. I had told Lord Cecil I could ride. He gave me an Irish hunter that would attempt anything you put him to. But that absurd perching on a pad! I came a nasty cropper at the first hedge."

"Yet you tried again?"

"Oh, yes. I had to show them I really could ride. It was fun after I got the knack. Of course, though, thoroughbreds do not buck," replied Marie.

She glanced admiringly at her companion's mare, and shifted to a discussion of the relative merits of thoroughbreds and broncos in mountain travel.

On their way down the valley they met no one, for the families of the police had moved back to their old camp-site opposite the Agency. When they reached the top of the divide, Hardy's glasses showed them the beef herd grazing far

down the river. They rode on along the road to the coulée, where they turned upstream to the spring rill that flowed from a cleft in the butte.

Marie suggested that they climb the butte. With subtle coquetry, she gave Hardy the privilege of assisting her up the ledges, though, had she chosen, she easily could have outclimbed him. They mounted to the top of the highest crag, where they sat down on the bare rock to view the plains and mountains through Hardy's glasses. Near at hand a pair of hawks circled over the coulée, and a distant eagle soared above the nearest mountain top. But on the earth below, with the exception of the beef cattle, they saw no living thing, either out on the great stretch of plains or across on the mountain slopes.

The utter stillness and solitude, the immensity of the cloudless blue dome above them, the great sweep of the landscape — all tended to quiet the excitement of their lively ascent. A hush fell upon them. Marie let the hand that held the glasses sink into her lap. She gazed off up the river, dreamy-eyed.

After a prolonged silence Hardy murmured in a half-whisper: "How alone we are! The world is young — it is the beginning of time. And in all the new, young world, you and I are alone — Marie."

It was the first time that he had ever used her given name in speaking to her. She started from her day-dream, the color deepening in her cheeks.

In the same moment she became aware that she had been looking at a moving object.

"Look!" she said, lifting the glasses to her eyes. "That must be the head and shoulders of a man. He is riding along on the far side of the ridge — an Indian; his head is muffled in a blanket."

"Marie!" softly repeated Hardy.

The girl sprang to her feet. "He has disappeared — but we are no longer alone in the world, Captain Hardy. Let us go down."

With instant repression of his disappointment, Hardy took the glasses and offered his hand to assist her down the first ledge. She ignored the offer. Nor did she permit him to help her at all during the descent. At the foot she paused only for a drink from the spring rill before mounting. He swung into the saddle a trifle less hastily.

Her pony had leaped away with the usual jumping start of a bronco. The mare stepped clear of the low scrub near the rill edge, out upon the sandy level of the coulée bottom. She was in the act of breaking into a trot when her rider's hat whirled from his head and he pitched sideways out of his saddle as if struck by lightning.

A moment later the report of the shot reached Marie. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Hardy outstretched on the ground, flaccid and inert. With a suddenness that almost threw her pony off his nimble feet, she wrenched him around. The mare had stopped within two

strides, and twisted her head about to look at her fallen master. What she saw was enough to have frightened most horses and women into terrified flight. The blood was gushing from a long wound above the right temple of the fallen man.

The mare snorted and trembled, yet turned to draw nearer to her stricken master. The girl spurred past, to place herself and her pony between Hardy and the hidden assassin. The manner in which Hardy had fallen showed that the shot had come from up the coulée. The quick eye of the girl perceived the dissolving puff of black-powder smoke that was rising above the coulée end of the ridge behind which she had seen the blanketed rider.

Flinging herself from her pony, she plucked Hardy's rifle out of its sheath and leveled it across his saddle. But she could see no sign of the assassin, and no second bullet came whirring across the coulée. The girl glanced down and saw that if Hardy was not already dead, he soon would die from loss of blood. Without a second look up the coulée, she bent over to rip the hem from her underskirt. This gave her a bandage. Her own and Hardy's handkerchiefs served for a compress. Swiftly she bound them on the wound and stopped the bleeding.

Even when this was done she did not pause to feel if his heart was beating. Nor did she stop to pick up the rifle. Utterly regardless of the assassin, she sprang up and darted to the spring

rill. If the murderer still lay in wait, he refrained from shooting at the courageous girl. In a twinkling she was back again beside Hardy, her hat full of the cool spring water. She drew him around on his back and began laving his face. Cleansed of blood, the gray pallor of his skin alarmed her. She loosened the collar of his gray flannel shirt and felt his heart. Several moments passed before she could detect a feeble fluttering.

When at last he opened his eyes, his head was in her lap. He gazed up into her down-bent face, his mind still in a daze. A frown of pain creased his forehead. He murmured, in the querulous tone of a sick child: "Mother — Mother!"

Instinctively her soft hand began to smooth away the frown with a gentle, caressing touch.

"A-a-ah!" he sighed. "You've come, Mother — dear, dear Mother!"

His eyes closed in restful contentment. The girl continued to stroke his forehead. Suddenly his eyelids lifted, and he looked up with the clear, bright gaze of full consciousness. He saw the womanly compassion in her beautiful face. Her eyes were tender and lustrous with sympathy for his suffering.

"Marie!" he murmured. "It is you! I — I thought my mother —"

"Hush!" she said. "You have been shot in the head. I do not know how serious it is."

"Shot? In the head?" He lay still, con-

sidering this. Her look had not altered under his gaze. From her utter lack of self-consciousness he divined that she thought him dangerously if not fatally wounded. After a pause he began to speak with the calmness that sometimes masks the most profound feeling:

"You scarcely know me — but, in the circumstances, I trust you will pardon me for — not waiting. I love you. From the first I thought you the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Now I know you to be the most lovely — your soul as beautiful as your face. Do not shake your head. It is the truth."

She averted her shame-flushed face. "I — I cannot permit you to speak to me this way."

"You are too good and kind to refuse to hear me," he replied in the same calm voice. "I know about him. I know I have no chance, dear. He is young and handsome; while I —" The pale lips curved in a quizzical smile. "Young and handsome, and he seems as worthy of you as most men can be. I hope he proves worthy. He must, for you have given him your love."

The girl's bosom heaved. The tears overran her brimming eyes. "You are — are generous! I did not think any man could be so generous!"

Again his lips curved whimsically. "Perhaps I am generous because there is no other course open. I would ask you — would urge you — to marry me, if I thought I had even a fighting chance of winning you."

"Marry you! You would ask me? Yet you know what my father is like; and you army people are so — so proud. I, an Indian quarterbreed, and my father what he is!"

"My mother — passed away — only a few months ago. She was all I had. Now I shall always have the thought of your goodness in addition to the dear memory of her."

The girl turned her face still farther away from him. "I cannot endure — You shall not think of me that way!"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Dupont," he apologized. "It is most inconsiderate and ungenerous of me to lie here claiming your sympathy on false pretenses. I feel my strength coming back. It must be that the bullet merely grazed my head."

Before she could prevent him, he twisted about and raised himself on his elbow.

"Oh!" she remonstrated. "You should not move."

He forced a laugh between his clenched teeth.

"No, it's what I thought — only a scratch. All right now, except for a little dizziness. I have been imposing on your sympathy — Did you see where the shot came from? I must go and rout out the rascal."

The girl grasped his rifle and sprang up away from him.

"You shall not go," she declared. "I'm sure he ran away the moment you fell."

Hardy straightened on his knees and rose un-

steadily to his feet. His voice was as firm as his pose was tottery: "Be so kind as to help me to mount."

"No," refused the girl.

She twitched the bridle reins over her pony's head. Still clinging to the rifle, she sprang into the saddle and galloped up the coulée. After two or three vain attempts to pull himself into the saddle, Hardy took his docile mare in lead and staggered across to the spring rill. Refreshed by a deep drink, he went over to a ledge that was high enough to enable him to mount.

He was still too weak and dizzy to ride out of a walk. Before he had gone many yards up the coulée, he saw Marie ride into the entrance of a gulley, wheel about, and start back at an easy canter.

As soon as she was within hearing, she called almost gaily: "He has gone—miles away by now. We'll ride in and send a party of police to track him."

Hardy turned his mare down the coulée. Marie overtook him close to where he had fallen when shot. Without stopping her pony, she leaned far over in the saddle and picked his hat off the ground. When she handed it to him, he perched it on his bandaged head to shield his eyes from the sun, and reached for his rifle. But the girl insisted upon keeping the weapon. Also, despite his protests, she rode between him and the ridge behind which she had seen the blanketed man.

CHAPTER XII

THE COQUETTE

UNABLE to endure the jar of a trot or gallop, Hardy urged the mare to her fastest walk. They had gone less than a mile when a horseman came loping up the slope from Sioux Creek.

Marie borrowed the field-glasses. A single glance through them at the approaching rider brought a blush and radiant smile to her face.

"It is Mr. Vandervyn," said Hardy in an even tone.

"Yes," she replied. She handed back the glasses, but did not look at him until Vandervyn rode up.

The young man's face was flushed, as if he had been drinking. When he pulled up before them, he was seemingly so struck with Hardy's appearance that he scarcely heeded Marie's joyful greeting.

"What's the matter, Captain?" he exclaimed. "You're white as a ghost — and your head tied up! You must have come a nasty cropper."

"Bit of an accident. Not serious," replied Hardy.

"It could not well have been closer," said Marie. "Captain Hardy has been shot."

"Shot?" cried Vandervyn.

"The bullet grazed the bone above the temple. Had it been half an inch lower or farther back, it must have killed him."

"Half an inch," repeated Vandervyn. His face crimsoned, and the veins of his forehead began to swell. "Where is the fellow? Did he get away? How long ago was it? Loan me the mare, Hardy. I'll run him down."

"It will take trackers to do that," said Marie.

"He was out of sight long ago. I think he must have run as soon as he saw Captain Hardy fall."

"I'll do my best to overhaul him, if the captain will loan me his mare. My pinto is about done up. I returned only an hour ago."

"Very good of you to offer," said Hardy. "But the rascal might ambush you. We'll order out a squad of police. Besides, I wish your report on your trip. I presume Redbear is at the Agency."

"No." Vandervyn turned a scowling face towards the butte, as if angrily eager to be off in pursuit of the would-be assassin. "Charlie went back to Thunderbolt's camp to see if his sister was getting along all right with the old chief. I told him that if he was welcomed, he had better stay a few days. If he and the girl make themselves agreeable, we shall have a better chance to quiet the tribe."

"You found conditions still unfavorable?"

"Yes. All the chiefs took a violent dislike to

you; and they had stirred up the whole tribe. Charlie and I talked and talked. You know a white man can talk Indians into anything, if he keeps at it."

"What result?" snapped Hardy.

Vandervyn shrugged. "We insisted that they ought to give you another hearing. I know we made some impression, especially on old Thunderbolt. If you went to his camp, you might get him to listen to you. That we learned for sure. The feeling against you, however, is so strong that you had better not risk it. The chiefs no doubt would be willing to let you visit the camps on safe conduct, so to speak; but I doubt if they could keep the wildest of the young bucks in hand. This shooting proves it. No doubt one of the red devils has been hanging around the Agency for days, waiting his chance to pot you. I tell you, Captain, none of us here would think any the less of you if you cut the whole business."

"I shall start for the mountains tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" remonstrated Marie. "Your wound — you must wait at least until it has begun to heal. I know it is useless for Reggie and me to advise against taking the risk of the trip. But three or four days will give your wound a fair start, and in the meantime Redbear and Oinna will be talking Ti-owa-konza and his camp into a milder mood."

"That last is a most excellent argument," said Hardy, and his firmly compressed lips curved in

a smile at the girl. "I shall take your advice, Miss Dupont."

Vandervyn had frowned over the concern in Marie's voice. Hardy's response started the veins of his forehead to swelling. He looked off away from the two, and remarked in a casual tone: "I'll ride in ahead and order out a squad of policemen to track down the scoundrel. Jake can interpret, if I'm unable to make them understand."

"Good!" said Hardy.

Vandervyn shot at Marie a glance of jealous anger, and put spurs to his pinto. He was soon loping down the slope to Sioux Creek. As Hardy's dizzy weakness did not lessen, he and Marie continued at a walk. Vandervyn was entering the Agency valley when they came down alongside Sioux Creek. But when they reached the valley and saw through the glasses the squad of police only just leaving the Agency, Marie conjectured that the jaded pinto had slowed to a walk while going up the valley.

The Indians were accompanied by Dupont. When they met his daughter and Hardy, he stopped to express his indignation at the outrage and to inquire the particulars. He then rode on with the stolid policemen.

At last Marie and Hardy reached the Agency. It was none too soon, for the injured man was reeling in his saddle. He wished to go to his own cabin, but the girl would not hear of it. With

the assistance of Vandervyn, who came out of the Dupont house to meet them, he was helped down from his mare to a cot in the shady porch. Here in the open air Marie washed the wound and took several stitches to draw the edges together. Though the bullet had cut the surface of the bone, it had not penetrated or fractured it. With antiseptic treatment the wound promised to heal in a few days.

During the operation, which Hardy endured without a groan, Vandervyn stood by, watching Marie's face with sullen jealousy. The moment she had rebandaged the wound, he suggested that it would be well to leave Hardy quiet. In reply she asked him to go for ice. When he returned, he found her sitting beside the cot, fan in hand. Hardy had fallen asleep. She rose and went into the house, and Vandervyn followed her.

The young man made no attempt to conceal his anger. He closed the parlor door and turned upon her accusingly. "So that's what you've been up to all the time I've been away!"

"Up to what, pray?"

"Coquetting with that old fossil of a tin soldier."

"Am I not a dutiful daughter?" the girl parried. "*Mon père* said I must make myself agreeable to the agent."

"He did?"

"Why not go and ask him, if you doubt what I say?"

"I don't. That's just it — damn it all!"

The girl's eyes flashed with resentment, but her voice was sweetly mocking: "Oh, Mr. Vandervyn, how can you? Captain Hardy never swore once during all our delightful rides."

"You've been riding with him every day?"

"All except one. I've been sorry ever since that I missed that one. He was invariably courteous. He is a gentleman."

"You infer that I am not!" exclaimed Vandervyn. "So he's courteous and smooth and slick, is he? One might know that you've been raised in the backwoods."

"You forget I spent four years at the capital of Canada."

"In a convent! No wonder you've let him play you."

The girl met the jeer with a tantalizing smile.

"It has been a most amusing game. He treats me with as much respect as if I were a young lady of his own set."

"There's no one else here for him to flirt with."

"That is an advantage, is it not?" The girl dropped into her English manner. "I daresay he will forget me as soon as he gets back to civilization — unless I decide to accept his proposal."

Vandervyn stared at her cynically. "You needn't try to rag me, Marie."

She smiled. "So you *do* doubt what I say.

Yet it is true. Captain Hardy did me the honor of declaring that he wished to marry me."

"Hardy asked you?—he, a captain in the regular army!"

"And I a quarterbreed, the daughter of my father. Amazing, is it not?"

Vandervyn caught himself up as he saw the proud humility of her expression. It was a new look to him. He had often seen her proud, but never humble. His jealousy flared: "How did you answer him? You didn't accept—you refused the old board-back!"

"Yes and no, that is, not yet," the girl teased. Vandervyn stepped close and grasped her arm.

"Tell me! Say you refused him."

"Be so kind as to release me, Mr. Vandervyn."

"I will not—until you tell me."

"But I have."

"You refused him?"

"No."

"What! You accepted him?"

"No, I have done neither. He is willing to wait for his answer."

"He expects to stay on here? You want him to stay!"

"Have I said so?"

"You coquette! You're trying to play me against him."

"So that is what you think of me?" The girl wrenched herself free and turned from him haughtily.

He stepped forward, and again grasped her arm. His voice shook with jealous anger: "You shall have nothing to do with him! He shall not have you!"

"Indeed! May I ask what right you have to dictate?"

"You love me, that is why," he flung back at her. "You love me, Marie. You can't deny it." His voice sank to a deep, ardent, golden note that sent a tremor through her. "You are mine — mine! You know it. Your arm quivers — that look in your eyes! You cannot hide your love, Marie — sweetheart!"

He sought to embrace her. But again she wrenched herself free from him. She could no longer feign hauteur. Her face was rosy with blushes; her bosom heaved; her eyes, behind their veiling lashes, glowed with tender passion. Yet she kept her head despite the intoxicating ardor of his look. Unlike Oinna, she was not so unsophisticated as he persisted in thinking her.

"You take a good deal for granted, Mr. Vandervyn," she attempted a mocking tone. "I am not yet your sweetheart, nor am I so sure I shall be."

He came nearer to her, his eyes the color of violets and sparkling with tiny golden gleams. He held out his arms. His voice was low and enticing: "Sweetheart — sweetheart!"

She swayed towards him, checked herself in the act of yielding, and eluded his grasp.

"No!" she cried. "You're a bit too sure."

I've no mother, halfbreed or otherwise, to advise me, my dear Reggie. I must be my own chaperon. You charge Captain Hardy with trying to play me. Yet when he spoke to me of his love he also spoke of marriage."

Vandervyn's eyes narrowed and as quickly widened in their most childlike stare.

"How can you, Marie?" he reproached. "You say that as if you think I have been trifling with you all these months, when you know as well as I — But of course, if you do not trust me, I have no show against him. He is free. I am, as you know, tied down by the uncertainty of my position."

"That is quite sad, is it not?" she mocked. "I am rather more fortunate. Whether or not there is any uncertainty about my position, I am not bound to any one, nor am I bound to bind myself to any one."

"Why are you so hard to me?" he pleaded. "You know that if my uncle got even a hint that I am interested in a girl out here it would be all off with me. He doesn't know what you are like, and it would be impossible in writing to convince him how charming you are."

"What a misfortune! Only, as it happens, I have no wish to marry Senator Clemmer. He already has a wife."

"That's just it — a wife and half a dozen daughters. It's all cut and dried that I am to marry Ella, the oldest unmarried one."

" Ah — so that is why — " faltered Marie, the rich color ebbing from her cheeks. But she was only momentarily overcome. Her spirit rallied almost as soon as it drooped. " It is most kind of you, Mr. Vandervyn, to tell me the delightful secret. Permit me to congratulate you."

His brows peaked in a doleful frown. " You are cruel to take it that way. I don't love the girl. You ought to know that — you do know it! Can't you see the hole I'm in? Even if it wasn't for Ella, they'd all think of you as a — an Agency girl. I wouldn't stand a ghost of a show of being appointed agent when Hardy quits."

" Does he intend to quit? "

" If you turn him down, he'll leave just as soon as he finds the tribe still set against him. Then — don't you see, sweetheart? — I shall get the appointment as agent. Your father and I can rip into the little old mine as fast as we please. We'll pay the workers big wages in trade goods. We want the tribe with us. Charlie and I took a careful look through the workings. The tunnel that Nogen ordered driven cuts the vein way below the shaft, and proves that it does not pinch out. It's a real mine, sweetheart. In a few months we'll have enough ore shipped to the smelter for me to cut loose from my uncle and do as I please. You know what that means."

Again he came towards her, his eyes softly glowing, his arms open to embrace her. And again she eluded him, this time with no hesitancy

or wavering. Her smile showed that she was once more in control of her emotions.

"Aren't you rather previous, Reggie?" she asked, from the other side of the tea-table. "We are not yet engaged."

"You coquette!" he cried. "You know I can't formally propose to you until I have got rid of Ella."

"How honorable you are!" she praised him, and he could detect no irony in her voice or look. "Now you prove you are a gentleman like Captain Hardy. You have stopped to consider the situation, and you realize how unfair it would be to your *fiancée* to make love to another girl — even to an Agency girl — until you have broken off your engagement."

"You coquette — you consummate French coquette!" repeated Vandervyn. "You love me — you know you do. And you know how I love you. What's the use of our being hypocrites over it?"

She affected to consider this before replying.

"Since you ask me, Reggie, there's the question of my answer to Captain Hardy. An army officer's wife has a certain social standing. That is something to make a mere Agency girl stop and think. Then, too, the captain may, after all, decide not to leave. Should he remain, I have an idea that you will continue to be tied to your uncle's and Ella's apron strings; and where should I be if I have — how did you express it? Ah, yes — if I should have turned him down?"

Vandervyn stifled an oath: "By — I'll have you yet! You shan't get away from me!"

"Indeed!" she mocked, though she quivered from the passionate ardor in his voice. To cover her emotion, she shrugged as only a woman of French blood can shrug. "That is to be seen, Mr. Vandervyn. And now, if you'll kindly excuse me, I must give a fair share of my time to my other devoted suitor."

She slipped out onto the porch before Vandervyn could interfere. He muttered a curse and went into the dining-room to get one of Dupont's whisky bottles out of the dainty little sideboard.

CHAPTER XIII

AT THE BROKEN MOUNTAIN

WHEN, at dusk, Dupont rode up to his house, Hardy was still on the cot in the porch. Vandervyn stood at the far end, puffing hard at a cigar as he watched Dupont approach.

The sound of the trader's bluff voice wakened Hardy from his doze and brought Marie to the door.

"No, not a track, not one single sign nowhere," Dupont was saying to Vandervyn.

"No tracks, *Père?*" queried Marie. "Didn't you look on the slope of the ridge where I told you?"

"Sure. We found plenty there. His pony had on rawhide shoes what they use back in the roughest part of the mountains; and we found his moccasin prints where he got off to sneak ahead and shoot. Lot of good that done us! He rode straight down to the creek; and that's the end of his trail. He must 've kept in the water for miles."

"Upstream or down?" questioned Hardy.

"Well, he sure didn't come up Sioux Creek, Cap. The p'leece covered both banks all the way

to the foot of the valley. Nary a sign. And if he'd rode up past the crossing in the creek, Mr. Van couldn't 'a' helped seeing him or his pony."

"Certainly," confirmed Vandervyn. "He could not possibly have come up as far as the road by the time I reached the creek; and the brush is very sparse and low from there on down."

"That's what I told the trackers. So we turned back down to the river. I sent one party down the coulée, and went up it with another. Followed both banks both ways for miles. Couldn't find no sign of where he come up out of the water. Thought I'd ride in to send out more of the p'leece with food."

"Very good," said Hardy. "We must track down the man, else others may follow his example."

Dupont rode over to the guardhouse and soon had another squad of the stolid police loping off down the valley to relieve their comrades.

The next day the search for the would-be assassin was continued, with no better results than the first. It was the same on the two succeeding days. At last Dupont declared that there was no hope of finding the mysterious lost trail, and Hardy called in the trackers.

The period of the search had been as agreeable to Hardy as it had been annoying to Vandervyn. Marie dictated to her patient with a gentle tyranny that exasperated the younger man and kept the officer in a humor most favorable to his

quick recovery. Under her care the wound escaped infection and healed rapidly.

To check Vandervyn's wooing—or it may have been to redouble his ardor through jealousy—she spent as much time as possible in Hardy's company. She was so gracious that Hardy began to show openly that he thought he might have a fighting chance to win her. This made Vandervyn furious. Yet he had to restrain himself from any outburst. He must consider his uncle and his *fiancée* in Washington—and the brother of a certain young girl in the camp of Ti-owa-konza. He must bide his time and endure the coquetry of Marie until both Redbear and Hardy were out of the way.

Noon of the fourth day Hardy stated at dinner that he was quite himself again and would start on the trip into the mountains the next morning. Redbear had not yet returned to the Agency, and Dupont, in his friendliest manner, offered his services as interpreter until the halfbreed should join the party.

When Hardy accepted this offer, Vandervyn looked at him in his guileless way and remarked in a casual tone: "With the tribe so uneasy, I suppose you will want me to stay here and look after Marie."

"My intention was to send Miss Dupont to town with an escort of police," replied Hardy.

"Under arrest? Oh, Captain, how can you do it?" teased the girl.

"Arrest, if necessary, young woman," he rejoined with mock severity. He added with a softness that brought a frown to Vandervyn's forehead: "You know your safety is the first consideration."

Marie stimulated tragic defiance: "Tyrant! You cannot banish me from my native heath. I am a member of the tribe. Besides, if *Père* is going into the mountains, I am going with him."

"No!" cried Vandervyn.

"I cannot permit that," declared Hardy.

"Oh, yes, you can and will," confidently replied the girl. "I shall be in no danger. If any one is attacked, it will be you and you only. There is the shooting the other day to prove it. Had he wished, the murderer easily could have shot me too, before I got down behind the horses."

"But in the mountains, among all those camps, Marie!" protested Vandervyn.

"I leave it to *Père* whether there will be the slightest danger to me."

Unobservant of Vandervyn's look, Dupont paused with a knifeful of food half-way to his mouth to agree with his daughter: "Ain't none of 'em what wants to lift *her* scalp. She'd be safer 'n me and you, Mr. Van—which is good as saying dead safe."

"Yet if I should be attacked?" said Hardy.

"If you are, it won't be no general outbreak, Cap. It will be a few young bloods a-laying for

you, or mebbe just one, like that buck done down at the coulée."

"You see," argued Marie. "You are the only one in danger of attack. If Reggie and I go, as well as *Père*, there will be that much less chance of a small party firing at you."

Hardy frowned. "It is not the custom for army officers to hide behind women's skirts, Miss Dupont."

"Listen to the fire-eater!" she rallied.

"You don't understand how men feel about these things, Marie," put in Vandervyn. "In the circumstances it would rather look as if the captain were taking you along as a buffer."

"Nonsense! My presence did not prevent his being shot, out there at the butte. Anyway, I am going along as field hospital corps." She turned to Hardy with a sudden change to seriousness. "As acting agent, Captain, it is your duty to pacify the tribe. You know there would be less chance of trouble should I go along."

"Very well," acquiesced Hardy. "I rely on your father's judgment. If there is the slightest chance of danger to you, he should know it. But as you are to be with the party, I shall take along a squad of police. Mr. Vandervyn, you may remain in charge of the Agency, if you prefer."

"No, thanks," snapped Vandervyn. "If you intend to let Marie run the risk of getting into a massacre, I most certainly shall go along."

"There ain't no chance of that, Mr. Van, long

as you and Charlie found the camps like what you said," reassured Dupont.

"Just the same, Reggie, the declaration does you proud," said Marie.

Though her tone was bantering, the glance that she bestowed on Vandervyn dispelled his frown and deprived Hardy of his smile.

To balance matters, the girl was unusually gracious to Hardy at supper. At breakfast she divided her smiles between the two with strict impartiality.

But when, shortly after sunrise, the party started off up the valley, Hardy began talking about tribal customs with Dupont and became so engrossed in the discussion that he failed to give his usual courteous attention to Marie. Vandervyn was quick to make the most of the girl's pique. The half-dozen Indian police of the escort were strung out in front with the pack horses. He suggested that it would be well to avoid the dust by getting in the lead.

When Hardy saw the couple ride ahead, he would have ordered them back had not Dupont again assured him that the girl would not be in the slightest danger at any time during the trip.

"You were not so certain of the friendliness of the Indians towards her the other day," remarked Hardy.

Dupont scratched his head. "Well, no, I wasn't, Cap; that's no lie. That there, though, was diff'rent. I'm going now by what Mr. Van

says about the feeling in the camps. They made him and Charlie welcome. I know me and Marie'll be a sight more welcomer than them. Wisht I felt as sure about you. The way the chiefs got riled at the council and that there shooting at you makes me feel kind of uneasy. Spite of what Mr. Van says, it wouldn't surprise me if the chiefs turned loose on you their own selves; while as for the young bucks — well, you don't know how the old squaws keep nagging 'em to go on the warpath like their daddies done."

"Never mind about me. If your daughter is safe, that is quite sufficient. You say this mine is centrally located with relation to the various camps. We will go to it first, and endeavor to get the tribe to meet us there in council."

"At the mine?" mumbled Dupont. "We-e-ll, you're the boss."

Hardy returned to the discussion of the tribal customs.

The party was now approaching the picturesque canyon of Sioux Creek. They entered it, and followed the narrow path alongside the torrent until they came to the first small Indian camp at the point where the valley widened. The Indians met Marie and Vandervyn with friendly greetings, but looked at Hardy with a stolid concealment of ill feeling that, according to Dupont, boded ill for the new agent's reception in the larger camps. Hardy set his jaw, and ordered the party to start on into the mountains.

AT THE BROKEN MOUNTAIN 151

Near where the creek valley again narrowed into a canyon the trail struck off up a mountain-side. From here onward the way was mostly up hill and down dale, only the hills were broken mountain-ridges and many of the dales wild gorges. Noon found the party over twenty miles from the Agency by trail, though less than half that distance in an air line. They had come upon no more Indian camps and had seen no more Indians. Dupont explained that at this season it was the custom for the camps to be moved away from the Agency trail, that the hunters might follow the game up on the flat tops.

By this time Hardy had learned all that the trader knew — or all that he wished to tell — about the tribe. Having attended to business, he now felt free to turn to pleasure. Vandervyn, however, had taken care to keep Marie reminded of the captain's ungallant neglect. He had continued to rasp her pique into resentment, while at the same time advancing his own suit by his devotion. In consequence, all of Hardy's attentions throughout the noon meal were met by the girl with chilling coolness. When the party started on again, it was in the same order as during the forenoon — Vandervyn and Marie in the lead, separated by the police from Hardy and Dupont.

Late afternoon found the party far in among the mountains, with snowy peaks on every side. Yet they were still a long ten miles by trail from

their destination. Upon learning from Dupont that there was no desirable camp-site nearer than the mine, Hardy asked his companion to ride forward and urge all to a faster pace.

Soon afterwards Vandervyn dropped back to ride with Hardy. Owing to the narrowness of the trail, he had to keep in front; but he slued about sideways in his saddle and began a friendly conversation that continued without a break while the hurrying ponies jogged along through the pines and aspens, around rocks and boulders and out across bushy hillsides.

The sun had set and dusk was approaching when the party came to a stiff climb that forced the nimblest of the ponies into a slow walk. It was a rocky, brush-grown spur ridge above which rose a mountainous mass of shattered rocks and boulders. Towards the crest of the ridge the ascent became so steep that the mare began to fall more to the rear of the nimbler mountain-bred ponies. Lack of training on such stiff slopes caused her to hesitate and pick her way.

The rest of the party had rounded a heap of rocks that towered up like a ruined castle at the ridge summit, and Vandervyn was about to follow them out of sight, when the thoroughbred came to a full stop, thirty yards down the trail, at the foot of the steepest part of the climb. Considerate of the fact that his tall mount was at a disadvantage in such a situation as compared with the

lower-set ponies, Hardy did not urge the mare to carry him up the ascent.

He paused a moment, waiting to see if she would make the attempt voluntarily. She stood motionless. He patted her neck, and dropped down out of the saddle. The suddenness of the movement alone saved him from the bullet that pinged down the mountain-side and passed above the saddle precisely where, an instant before, had been his midbody.

The report of the rifle had yet to reach Hardy's ear when he peered over the mare's withers in search of the smoke of the shot. He could see no trace of vapor, and the peculiar crack of the report that reverberated down the mountain-side as his glance swept over the crevices of the rocks confirmed his surmise that the charge fired had been smokeless powder. But though he saw no smoke, he did not look in vain. Above a boulder, high up in a cleft, he perceived a devilish painted face, surmounted by a war bonnet.

Without exposing himself, he reached over to jerk his rifle from its sheath. As it whipped clear, he glanced sideways up the ridge slope at Vandervyn. The young man had halted his pony on the ridge crest and was staring back down at Hardy. From where his pony stood the castle rock shut off all possible view of the assassin.

Hardy waved him imperatively to go on.

"Forward!" he shouted. "Guard Miss Du-

pont. May be more of them. Send the police around to flank — ”

But, struck by Vandervyn's sharp-roweled spurs, the pinto had leaped out of sight. A shot that grazed the mare's withers brought Hardy's attention back to the assassin. In a flash he flung up his rifle and fired at the down-peering devilish face. It vanished as he pressed the trigger.

Swift as a puma, he sprang around the mare's head and dashed up the slope, keeping a large boulder in line between himself and his enemy. A bullet came pinging down over the boulder and passed under his upraised arm. A few seconds more and, safe behind the huge stone, he slowly edged his hat up above the top. The ancient ruse drew a shot that drilled a hole through the crown of the hat and told him that the assassin had not shifted his position.

Hardy glanced about, and again held up his hat. Again it drew a shot. Instantly he scrambled obliquely upward towards another boulder. It was a desperate move. A bullet grazed his thigh as he flung himself behind the bushes beside the second boulder. Despite his exertions, his face was now white. But it was not because of fear. His eyes were cold and hard and very bright.

The bushes afforded him a screen. He thrust forward his rifle, and peered up the slope through the interstices of the scrubby foliage. The war bonnet of the assassin was plainly visible above

the boulder in the cleft. Hardy fired. The feathered crest whipped back out of sight. No return shot came pinging down the slope. A less experienced man would have jumped to the conclusion that the bullet had pierced the murderous brain below the band of the head-dress. Hardy waited.

The twilight was fast fading. Still Hardy waited, his gaze scanning the cleft and the rocks on either side. It was time for the police to come creeping around on the flank of the assassin. A little more and the dusk would render close shooting difficult. Yet the precious moments slipped by, and no sign of the police.

Over on the far side of the cleft there was a faint glint of metal in the deepening shadow. Without a moment's hesitation Hardy aimed and fired. The mountain-side rang with a shrill yell. The bullet had found its mark. Hardy leaped to his feet and dashed up the mountain-side, keeping behind shelter where it was available, but in places boldly rushing up over open spaces.

No shots were fired at him; no yells followed the first shriek of pain. It was natural to suppose that the assassin had met the fate he had intended to deal out. As Hardy approached the boulder behind which he had first seen his enemy, he became more and more reckless. He scrambled across to the far side of the cleft.

There, on the spot where he had seen the glint, he found a trace of blood. The wounded man

had crept away up the cleft. For several yards Hardy followed the trail by the splashes of crimson on the leaves and rocks. Then the traces ceased. The assassin had managed to bandage his wound.

The shadows in the cleft were fast deepening. Hardy started up the cleft as fast as he could climb. It twisted about among the huge shattered rocks of the mountain-top. Within a few yards it forked. He took the more promising lead and scrambled on upward.

Soon the cleft reached its head and dipped down into a gap. Hardy paused as if to turn back. But over in one of the many clefts on the far side of the gap he thought he saw something move among the boulders. He sprinted down the slope and across the gap, his face now flushed with exertion, but his eyes still cold and hard.

CHAPTER XIV

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

AMONG the heaps of broken rocks in the bottom of the gap Hardy lost sight of the cleft for which he was heading. There was nothing to distinguish it from the half-dozen other clefts on the far side of the gap. As he emerged from among the rocks, he was unable to pick out his goal. Yet he was too grimly set on his purpose to turn back.

He rushed up into the nearest cleft, and found nothing except bushes and boulders. He tried the next, and thought he saw faint prints of moccasins in a streak of wind-blown dust. He darted up the cleft, and came into a maze of caves and half-covered passages so dark and intricate that he was lost before he realized the fact.

When he started to return along what he supposed to be the passage by which he had entered, he soon found himself in a *cul-de-sac*. Dusk was now deepening into night. He came out of the *cul-de-sac* and chose another passage at random. It led him through a cave that was now as dark as midnight, and out into a steep ascent between overhanging ledges. This certainly was not the

way by which he had entered, but he kept to it, eager to escape out of the maze.

Night had fallen when at last he reached the top of the cleft and clambered up on a ridge crest. But the sky was clear, and the starlight enabled him to see the outlines of the mountains that cut the skyline. Even the highest of them looked different from any that he had seen during the day. He could not tell whether this was owing to the darkness or to his having crossed over to another watershed.

The fact that he was completely lost did not alarm him. The frown that he upturned to the stars indicated only annoyance. No doubt he was irritated by his failure to run down the murderous liar-in-wait, and perhaps also by the strange failure of the rest of the party to come to his support in the attack.

A star lower down than any of the others caught his eye. He peered at it fixedly. Above it loomed the dark outline of a pine-black mountain, backed by the huge white bulk of a snowy peak. The little twinkling point of light was not a star—it was a fire, two or three miles away across the intervening valley.

It might be the campfire of the party, ahead on the trail, or, what was more probable, it might be a fire at one of the Indian camps. Hardy gazed at it a few moments, then took his bearings by the stars, and started down the mountain-side directly towards the fire.

Once clear of the rocks of the shattered mountain-top, he found the going unexpectedly easy. The valley below sloped down gently to the stream in the bottom and as smoothly up on the far side to the mountain on which he had seen the fire. Deer-trails led through the scattered brush and around the few small groves of aspens. He waded the icy waters of the creek at one of the shallows, and swung away up the other side of the valley at a quick step.

Almost from the first he had lost sight of the fire, and at no time did he see any trace of the trail to the mine. Yet he kept on without a sign of hesitancy. Guided by the stars and the looming crest of the snow-peak, he held true to his course on across the valley and up among the pines of the opposite mountain. Off to the left he heard the diminutive roar of a mountain-rill dashing down a ravine to join the main stream in the valley.

At last he came up over the edge of the ridge-top, or terrace, on which the rill headed. The moment his eyes cleared the low underbrush below the few scattered pines he perceived the flicker of the fire for which he was looking. He could not make out the appearance of the dark forms around the fire, but their number and the half-dozen white tepees grouped around the fire told him that he had not found the camp of his party.

He had no more than made this discovery when

a number of yelping, snarling mongrel dogs rushed out at him like a pack of wolves. He met their attack by swinging his rifle barrel around in a circle. The cowardly curs closed about him, but were afraid to leap in within reach of the club. He had not stopped his advance. Nor did he pause or hesitate when over the heads of the leaping, yelling pack he saw the Indian women and children scurry to the tepees and the bucks spring up with their bows and guns.

Soon he had approached into the circle of the firelight. Some of the Indians started to aim their weapons at him. He held up his right hand, palm forward. A deep voice called out a guttural order. The threatening bucks drew apart to right and left, and a naked boy ran forward with a blazing stick to drive off the dogs.

Hardy calmly advanced to the fire between the grim and stolid bucks. There was not one among them who was not itching to drive a bullet or arrow through his body, and he knew it. Yet he faced them as coolly and quietly as if they were his own party.

The bucks looked towards the far side of the fire, as if for the signal to strike down the audacious intruder. Hardy followed their glances, and perceived a blanket-wrapped Indian who sat in the midst of the volcanic hush seemingly as placid and immobile as a Buddha. His face was down-bent, and so muffled in the blanket that Hardy could not make out the features. It was,

however, easy to divine that the man was the chief of the band.

Hardy walked around the fire with his most dignified bearing, sat down beside the chief, and laid his rifle on the ground between them. He then folded his arms and waited, his eyes fixed on the fire in a calm, unwavering gaze. There followed a silence of a full minute's duration. He knew that it might end at any moment in an attack. His hand gripped the hilt of his pistol in his breast under the edge of his coat. The bucks stealthily shifted their positions until they had completely surrounded the unwelcome visitor. Hardy sat motionless, and gave no sign that he observed them.

At last, when the suspense had become almost unendurable, the chief muttered a word to the nearest buck. The man glided back towards the largest tepee. The chief pushed the blanket from his head. Hardy slowly looked aside at him, and perceived the powerful profile of Ti-owa-konza, the Thunderbolt. As he calmly turned his gaze back to the fire, his eyes were bright with satisfaction. He was to deal with the head chief of the tribe.

There followed another silence. It was broken by the tread of light feet, and a girl appeared beside the chief. Hardy caught a glimpse of a gingham skirt, and glanced quickly up at the face of the girl. He was met by the frightened gaze of Oinna Redbear.

"Oh!" she murmured. "It is bad! You oughtn't to've come here, sir. They don't like you. Mr. Van said he was going to tell you —"

A grunt of disapproval from Ti-owa-konza cut short the hurried statement. After a dignified silence the chief spoke to the girl. She clasped her hands and interpreted in an anxious murmur:

"He says I must be only the tongue between you and him. He says, why did you lie? Why have you not gone away, as you said you would?"

Hardy turned, and looked direct into the haughty face of the chief. "Tell him, I did not lie. I did not say I would go away. I wished to stay, and prove myself the friend of the tribe. Your brother told the lie, to keep the chiefs from destroying the tribe by attacking me."

Oinna's interpretation brought guttural exclamations from the surrounding bucks. Hardy was equally unmoved by their ferocious glances and the contemptuous rejoinder of Ti-owa-konza:

"Does the chief of the Longknives think to destroy a tribe single-handed?"

"No, nor do I wish others to destroy the tribe," answered Hardy. "I do not wish the Longknives to come and make war on the tribe. Yet that is what they will do if I am harmed."

Again Oinna interpreted in her flute-like tones. This time the chief considered before speaking. Oinna's gold-tinted skin turned a sallow gray.

"He — he says he will fight if you do not promise to go away!" she gasped.

Hardy smiled. "Have no fear, Oinna. He is too great a chief to kill a guest in his camp. Tell him, I came to the Reservation to be a friend to the tribe. Though I am a chief of the Longknives, my heart is good towards his people. It would be foolish of him to kill or drive away the friend of his people."

This time Ti-owa-konza gave the intruder an open stare of contempt. The surrounding bucks glared more ferociously than ever.

"He says you are forked-tongue," Oinna translated the reply. "He says, if you are a friend, why did you say at the council that you would punish all the tribe for the killing of Nogen?"

"That is a mistake. I did not say I would punish the tribe."

Oinna interpreted the answer and the grim old chief's rejoinder: "The Longknife's mouth was big at the Agency. Here he is alone in my camp and his mouth is small."

"I talk as I talked at the Agency. What Ti-owa-konza claims I said about punishing the tribe is not the truth. There must have been a mistake in the interpretation, or the chiefs did not hear aright. I had only peace and friendship in my heart. I said that I did *not* blame the killing of Mr. Nogen on the tribe."

This statement failed to break Thunderbolt's mask of stolidity, though some of the other Indians slightly relaxed their menacing attitude.

Hardy took off his hat to show the red scar above his temple, and spoke again.

"I do not blame the killing of Mr. Nogen on the tribe; nor do I blame the tribe for the wrongdoing of the bad-hearted Indian who shot me in the head five days ago. The same man, or another man with a bad heart, tried to shoot me, after sundown today, as I came up the trail over on the other side of the broken-topped mountain."

Oinna's interpretation was met by a guttural "Ugh!" of surprise even from the chief. He asked shrewdly: "If the Longknife does not lie, is he not afraid to be in my camp? It is the nearest to the trail."

Hardy smiled, and held out his open palm to the chief: "I trust Ti-owa-konza and his people. There is only that one bad Indian, and even he may come to feel good in his heart towards me when he learns that I am the friend of the tribe."

Still the old chief's face remained inscrutably immobile. He pondered, and at last made another sharp query: "The Longknife claims that he is a friend. Why, then, did he say at the council that he will do the way Nogen did, and make my people dig stones and dirt from the big holes, without giving them any trade goods for their work?"

Hardy's clear eyes dimmed for a moment, and then sparkled with comprehension. He answered

with an earnest sincerity of tone that compelled belief:

"I now see that at the council Redbear mistook much of what I told him to say, or else, in their anger, Ti-owa-konza and his sub-chiefs failed to understand aright the interpretation. The place where stones are dug is on Indian ground. It belongs to the tribe. No white man has any right to make your people dig stones. If they are willing to dig, they must be given trade goods for their work."

The response to this statement was unmistakable. The moment that Oinna had interpreted it, the last trace of menace disappeared from the bearing of the Indians, and even the chief began to relax. Yet he had still another query:

"Did not the Longknife say he would stop the issue to the tribe of all Government goods, and that he would take away from the tribe all their lands and give them to the white men?"

At last the real cause of the failure of the council was disclosed. Either intentionally or through stupid blundering, Redbear had made the chiefs furious by a twisted interpretation that had given the exact reverse of what had been intended. With the key to the situation in his hands, Hardy at once began to make clear what he had tried to tell the council. He explained why the issues of goods would cease the following spring, and what was meant by an allotting of tribal land in severalty. He added that if there was gold on any

of the Reservation land, it would be well for the tribe to sell that part of what they owned; otherwise bad white men would, sooner or later, come in and steal it.

More than half convinced of Hardy's sincerity, though with still a lingering suspicion, Ti-owa-konza explained in turn that the tribe was not only willing to allot the farming land of the Reservation and sell the mineral land, but a treaty to that effect had been agreed upon by the tribe, the previous year. All that remained to be done was for the white chiefs at Washington to agree on the price to be paid for the mineral land, and for a delegation of tribal chiefs to go to Washington and put their marks on the treaty paper.

A question or two from Hardy brought out the angry complaint that when Nogen began to dig stones, he told the chiefs there would be no treaty, and that the tribe must dig the stones for him, or they would receive no more issue goods. Chief Van and Big-mouth (Dupont) had tried to get Nogen to give trade goods to the young men and women who had dug the holes. But Nogen would not allow it. Then a bad Indian had shot Nogen, and Van had shot the killer. The tribe did not blame Chief Van. But they had felt bad towards Nogen, and they had felt bad towards the new agent because they thought he would do as Nogen had done. Now they would like the new agent. No Indian would wish to kill him

when it became known what he intended to do for the tribe.

After the old chief finished this explanation, Hardy found himself a welcome and honored guest in the camp. At his suggestion, Ti-owa-konza readily agreed to send out runners in the morning to call a council at the mine the day after. Hardy, in turn, promised to draw up papers to make smooth the way of the delegation of chiefs in Washington.

At a sign from her grandfather, Oinna now brought food to the guest. While he ate he talked with her about her experience in the camp. She told him joyously that her mother's father and all his family and band had been very kind to her and had been hospitable, though not so kind, to her brother.

But when Hardy casually inquired whether Redbear had left the camp at the same time as Vandervyn, the girl's flow of conversation came to an abrupt stop. She blushed and stammered, and became so painfully shy and confused that Hardy considerably feigned drowsiness and asked to be shown to a bed.

CHAPTER XV

HIS DUTY

TI-OWA-KONZA himself led the guest to the place of honor in his own tepee. Hardy handed over his rifle, and stretched out on the blankets between the chief and his oldest squaw. Oinna and several men and women and children slipped into the tepee to take their places around the circle of the canvas wall, according to their relative standing in the family.

Hardy would have preferred to sleep out under the open sky. There was, however, no fire in the tepee, and the ventilation was fairly good. In the peaceful hush that fell upon the tepee and camp, he soon dropped asleep.

At dawn he was roused by Ti-owa-konza with a greeting as friendly as it was dignified, though Hardy had to surmise its meaning from the chief's expression. Oinna was already outside, helping with breakfast. While she served her grandfather and the guest, Hardy suggested that she go with him to the mine, where they probably would find Marie and the rest of the party. The girl blushed and hesitated, but at last murmured that she would go to meet her brother, who, she thought, might be at the mine.

Reluctant as was Ti-owa-konza to part with his half-white granddaughter, he ordered her pony brought in and saddled. When she explained to Hardy that the mine was only a mile away across the mountain, he declined the offer of a saddleless mount.

Shortly after sunrise he took ceremonious leave of the old chief, and set out up the mountain-side with the girl and a young Indian guide. There was no trail, but the slope was easy and the walking good on the springy pine-needle turf. The growth of pines was not dense enough to impede their advance or to more than partly obstruct the view. Looking back over the valley, Hardy saw with almost startling distinctness the crags and blocks and clefts of the shattered mountain where he had lost himself.

"I should have asked your grandfather to trail down the man who tried to murder me," he remarked to Oinna. "Now that I know the excuse the fellow had for thinking I should be killed, I do not wish him punished. But he may need help, and, anyway, he should be told I am the tribe's friend."

"He will be told, sir," predicted Oinna. "I know my grandfather will send out trackers without your asking."

"Very good," said Hardy.

He turned for another look at the broken-topped mountain. It seemed nearer than ever. If the Indian camp was only a mile from the

mine, then the mine was little over three miles from the point on the trail where he had been attacked. Yet, according to Vandervyn, the distance around by trail was nearly seven miles. The fact that the broken mountain was impassable to ponies, added four miles to the trip from the Agency. Hardy noted the bearings and distances of all prominent points around him with the eye of one well trained in the art of topography.

A quarter-hour brought the little party to the top of the low mountain. Before them the far side of the mountain pitched down a steep and rocky incline into a narrow valley. The silent Indian guide pointed to a terrace midway down the descent. From amidst the pines was rising a cloud of blue-black smoke. No Indian would have built a fire of green wood. The guide grunted, spoke a word to Oinna, and started back to the Indian camp.

"He says, white man down there," explained Oinna. Her eyes beamed radiantly, and she clasped her hands. "Oh if *he* is there! I do so long to —" She checked herself and cast a frightened glance at Hardy. "I—I mean my brother—I mean Charlie. You know I told you he might be at the mine."

"Yes," said Hardy, his lips tightening. "Let us go down."

This was easier said than done. Hardy might have been able to scramble straight down the

steep mountain-side. The pony had to take the slope at an angle. Even picking the way for himself, the nimble little beast had all he could do to keep his footing. Oinna was soon more than willing to slip out of the saddle and make the descent afoot. Nor did she shrink from accepting Hardy's aid at the more difficult places. Only a mountain-bred pony could have zigzagged after them down the ledges and rock-slides and brush-tangled slopes of that mountain-side.

They reached the foot of the steep descent fully three hundred yards off to the right of the smoke. But as all the remainder of the slope from the terrace down to the valley bottom was gradual and much less rough than that above, Oinna mounted, and they moved rapidly along the terrace towards the smoke.

Soon Oinna pointed out a cabin among the pines. They were within fifty yards of it when Vandervyn and Dupont came out of a hole in the cliff-end of a spur-ridge near the cabin, and stood staring at the newcomers in undisguised astonishment. Hardy swerved and hastened towards them, his eyes bright and cold. The two men glanced at one another, and advanced to meet him half-way.

Dupont was the first to speak: "By Gar, Cap, we sure are mighty glad to see you ag'in all safe and sound! Thought you'd gone and lost yourself on that cussed mountain. The p'leece are back there now, looking for you."

"And you two are here, I see," dryly rejoined Hardy. "When I was attacked, you rode away, instead of flanking the enemy, as I ordered."

"I beg your pardon, Captain Hardy," replied Vandervyn, his eyes flashing with quick anger. "There is no occasion for you to charge us with cowardice. I heard you say nothing about flanking. You told me to go ahead and guard Marie."

"I added for you to send the police around to flank the assassin."

Vandervyn drew himself up stiffly. "You have my word, sir, that I heard nothing of that."

"In common decency, you might have returned to see what had become of me," returned Hardy.

Vandervyn bit his lips to restrain a violent reply. Dupont hastened to speak for him: "We done our best, Cap. Mr. Van got the idea you meant us to rush Marie through here to the mine, where she'd be safe. The cabin's loop-holed, as you'll see. So we lit out fast as we could. But soon's we found you wasn't following, we sent back three of the p'leece. After we got here, one of 'em come along with the report that they'd found your mare, but lost your trail up in the rocks. First thing this morning we sent the whole bunch back to trail you."

The honest bluntness of Dupont's tone and his straightforward statement compelled belief. Hardy nodded. "Very well. I could not expect that either of you would trouble to go back for me."

"Just the same, we would've, Cap, you can bet your life on it — only on account of Marie and — " The trader turned a dubious glance on Oinna, and remarked: "I see you stumbled onto old Thunderbolt's camp."

"I did," said Hardy, and he smiled. "Thanks to Miss Oinna, I was able to make myself better understood than when her brother acted as interpreter. I have reason to believe that he wilfully misstated what I said to the chiefs, and caused them — "

"Oh, no — no, sir! Oh, no, Charlie never could have done that!" cried Oinna, forgetful of her timidity in the defense of her brother.

"By Gar!" swore Dupont. "That old Thunderbolt is a deep one. Just like him to try to throw you off the track by laying it all on Charlie."

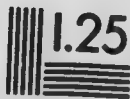
"I'm not so sure of that, Jake," broke in Vandervyn. "You remember, Charlie was scared stiff. The captain gave him a lot of talk to interpret in big chunks. He may have become muddled."

"We-ll, mebbe that had part to do with it. It's mighty easy to git Lakotah mixed hind-foremost. Just the same, you can bet the whole bunch was primed to take everything the wrong way. They was feeling bad in their hearts when they come. Can't tell me the whole tribe ain't sore. Look at the way they've twice tried to git Cap — and potting Charlie last night."



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(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



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"Charlie?" gasped Oinna. "You say — Ch, Mr. Dupont, he's not — not —"

"No — buck up," brusquely replied Vandervyn. "He was only nipped through the arm. He will be all right in a few days."

"All right? O-o-oh, thank you!" sighed the girl.

In the stress of the moment she forgot that they were not alone. She held out her arms to him and looked up into his face, her soft eyes beaming with love and adoration.

He frowned, and his voice grated with harshness: "Don't be a fool! He's in the cabin. Miss Dupont is taking care of him. Go and thank her, not me."

Tears gushed into the girl's eyes. She drooped her head, and slunk away as if Vandervyn had struck her. Hardy's face became like iron.

"Mr. Vandervyn," he admonished, "do not let me again hear you speak to any woman in that tone."

Vandervyn's smile was not agreeable. "You must have seen the silly look she gave me. I've got to speak that way to keep her from me."

Hardy's frown deepened. "Be careful what you insinuate, sir. The girl is as pure and modest as Miss Dupont."

Vandervyn shrugged. "The chivalrous chevalier! Have it your own way. Now I suppose you'll go in and worry her and rag Charlie into

a fever about balling up his interpretation at the council."

"As for that —" began Hardy. He stopped short, and raised his hat.

Marie had come out of the cabin, and was hastening forward to greet him, her beautiful face radiant.

"Captain!" she called. "You're here — really here, safe and unhurt!"

"Thanks to Miss Redbear," replied Hardy.

"But how could Oinna — surely she did not help you escape the murderer?"

"No. It was easy enough to dislodge the fellow. The difficulty was to track him among those rocks. Soon lost him and myself also."

"And he escaped to shoot Charlie — the wolf! The poor boy was tracking a deer over on the ridge half a mile or so this way. He escaped down to the trail. There one of the police found him, and brought him here on your mare, two or three hours after dark."

"I regret that I did not have better luck," remarked Hardy. "I know I wounded the rascal; but this proves he was not too disabled to shoot."

"It makes me shudder to think what would have happened had he found courage to wait among the rocks and shoot you down as you passed him," exclaimed the girl.

"All's well that ends well," Hardy sought to reassure her. "I'm here, unhurt, as you see; Redbear, I understand, has only a slight wound;

and the danger will not recur. Thanks to Miss Redbear, the old chief now knows that I am a friend of the tribe. He will call a council to meet us here tomorrow."

"A council — here?" queried Vandervyn.

"Why not?" demanded Hardy, fixing him with his keen gaze. "Could there be a more suitable place for a tribal council than at the mine which has been the source of all the recent trouble on this Reservation?"

"*Nom d'un chien!*" muttered Dupont. "What's that breed girl gone and blabbed?"

"Nothing," rejoined Hardy. "She has done no more than interpret between the head chief and myself. I have learned all about Nogen's dishonesty and his harshness to the tribe. It is well that you and Mr. Vandervyn tried to induce him to be more just, else I should order you both off the Reservation for lying to me."

"Lying? What d'you mean by that?" blustered Dupont.

"The word is explicit," said Hardy. "Mr. Vandervyn, take your hand from your holster. Miss Dupont, I regret the necessity of making this reprimand in your presence."

The girl's eyes were ablaze with indignant anger. "Regret is a mild excuse for insulting my father, sir!"

"You add to my regret. Yet, as acting agent, it is my duty to censure your father and Mr. Vandervyn for deceiving me. Had they told me

about Nogen's malfeasance — his blocking of the new treaty and compelling the Indians to work the mine without pay — ”

“ He did that? ” Marie questioned her father.

“ Well, me and Mr. Van done all we could to git him to pay 'em,” mumbled Dupont.

“ Of course! But he — I did not think him so mean! ” The girl's eyes blazed, and her nostrils dilated. “ So that was why he was shot? I don't blame the man who did it — I could have done it myself! The thief! — Reggie, if only you had let the killer escape! ”

“ Couldn't,” tersely replied Vandervyn. “ He was blood-mad — would have got Charlie and me too, if we hadn't got him.”

“ That was self-defense,” said Hardy. “ It has been greed and dishonesty, though, that have prompted you to conceal from me the facts that led up to the killing. I have twice barely escaped assassination because I knew nothing about the situation, and the chiefs supposed I would do as Nogen had done. Aside from the danger to me, you have permitted the tribe to verge upon an uprising that would have compelled their pacification by the War Department. All this that you might steal the ore of this mine.”

“ Steal our own ore? ” bellowed Dupont. “ You're plumb locoed! ”

“ Not so loud, if you please,” quietly replied Hardy. “ The ore is not yours.”

“ That's all you know about it,” blustered the

trader. "Ain't I one of the discoverers and locators of the lode?"

"The lode is not subject to location. It is on Indian land."

"What if it is? Ain't I a member of the tribe?"

"The tribal land has not yet been allotted in severalty. Every square foot of ground on the Reservation belongs to the tribe as a whole. No one member can hold individual title to any of it."

"Well, what of it?" demanded Dupont, far from silenced. "If the tribe wants to work the mine, and they want me and Mr. Van to manage it for them and buy the ore, what in hell have you got to say about it?"

"Nothing at present," answered Hardy. "If the tribe consents, I shall make no objection. You will be able to cheat them of only a few thousand dollars before the new treaty is consummated and all this mineral land opened to location and entry under the mining laws."

The veins on Vandervyn's crimsoned forehead were swollen and pulsating with his furious anger. He spoke in a high, airy tone: "So you are going to pull wires to get our mine taken away from us?"

"I shall see that justice is done towards the tribe," said Hardy, and he fixed the younger man with a glance that compelled him to blink and look aside.

But now Marie's swift-mounting scorn and anger burst out in a storm of passion:

"You hypocrite! you self-righteous martinet! You would reprimand my father and Mr. Van, would you? And each a thousand times better man than you! Who has made all the trouble here since you came? The whole tribe hates you — and I'm one of the tribe! You straight-laced prig! You say *Père* and Reggie are dishonest, when all they wish to do is to give the tribe good work and good pay. But you—you want to take away the mine from the tribe and from us too!"

"Miss Dupont, if you will permit me —" protested Hardy, his face white.

"Don't you dare speak to me!" cried the girl, now fairly beside herself. "I hate you—I detest you! To insult my father, and then rob him of his mine! He found it—he and Reggie developed it! If Nogen had not been so despicable — He was killed for it—he deserved to be killed. So will you be, if you rob us of our mine!"

Hardy winced under the scornful reproaches, yet did not yield a hair. "I have done my duty, Miss Dupont. I shall continue to do it. I have no intention of robbing any one of what is rightfully his."

"You mean legally!" she retorted. "Your miserable laws! You know that morally the mine is ours!"

"Yet when the Reservation is thrown open for entry, some one else who never saw the mine may slip in ahead of us and jump it," added Vandervyn.

"That is something I cannot prevent," said Hardy.

"You can!" contradicted Marie. "The chiefs will not insist on the new treaty — they will do what *Père* thinks best for them and us, if you leave the matter to him and Reggie."

"I must do my duty as acting agent," insisted Hardy.

The girl turned her back upon him in open disdain. He raised his hat to her, and started for the cabin, his face white, but his shoulders squared back and his head very erect.

CHAPTER XVI

ANOTHER CARD OR TWO

VANDERVYN'S eyes flashed with deadly hate as he glared at the aggressively straight back of the captain. Unobserved by Marie, he slipped his hand down to his hip. The half-crooked fingers were closing upon the hilt of his revolver when Dupont gripped him by the wrist.

"Don't you, Mr. Van," he muttered. "We ain't going to play that card. You agreed not to."

"Let go, you fool!" The young man's voice was dry and husky.

Marie glanced about. At sight of Vandervyn's face her own anger gave way to alarm.

"No, no, Reggie, not that!" she exclaimed. "It would ruin you!—and then—then what should I do?"

The quaver in her voice, the tender passion in her glorious eyes, reached him even at the height of his unrestrained fury. He stared at her as if dazed, and permitted Dupont to pull his hand away from the revolver hilt. Then a sudden black suspicion sent a fresh wave of crimson into

his hate-convulsed face. He wrenched his wrist out of Dupont's grasp and again clutched his revolver.

"You — to save him!" he gasped.

"No!" denied the girl. She sprang before his upraised revolver. "Not him — you — save you!"

"Keep away!"

"No!" she insisted, and she grasped the muzzle of the heavy Colt's.

All unconscious of the struggle behind him, Hardy turned the corner of the cabin. Vander-vyn ceased his attempt to pull the weapon out of the girl's desperate clutch.

"Hope you're satisfied," he growled. "He's safe out of sight."

"And *you're* safe," she panted. "Oh, how could you be so foolish?"

"Foolish?" he rejoined. "Mine lost — you — everything lost!"

"Not all," she whispered, her eyelids drooping to hide the love-light in the black depths beneath.

"You mean —?" he questioned, with a quick upleaping of ardent fire. But the flame flickered and subsided. "All the worse! I'll have to go back there — to Ella — knowing that you —"

"There *must* be some way."

"Not unless I get enough money to cut loose, enough to make me a free man, so that —" He looked over her shoulder at the cabin and

frowned. "Come down to the creek where she — where he can't see us."

"*Père* too. Perhaps we can think of some plan."

Dupont nodded. But he was slow in following the couple. He loitered more and more behind, and as soon as they passed from sight around a thicket of chaparral, he quietly turned back.

A few minutes later Hardy came out of the cabin. Though very grave, he was cool and alert. He at once walked up to Dupont, who sat puffing at his pipe on the top of the mine-dump.

"Redbear seems to be half-delirious. I thought it best to leave him quiet," he said. "Where is your daughter?"

Dupont pointed vaguely down the mountain-side. "She went off with Mr. Van, to try to smooth down his fur. You riled him considerable, Cap."

"I regret that it was necessary to reprimand you."

"All right, Cap. I don't bear no grudge. I'm willing to accept your apology."

"You misunderstand me, sir. I cannot apologize for doing my duty."

"Well, I *would* accept it if you made it," genially insisted the trader. "Guess, though, Mr. Van is pretty hot under the collar."

Hardy frowned. "That does not affect me. It is the thought that your daughter —"

Dupont nodded in confirmation of the unfinished statement. "It ain't going to be dead easy to

git hitched up with her ag'in. She bosses me around like I was a Injin. But she won't allow nobody else to jump on me. Women're funny that way. She don't often show it, but she thinks a sight of me."

"There is Vandervyn, as well," added Hardy.

"Well, as for him," remarked the father, his eyes twinkling craftily, "I figured they'd make a go of it — before you come along. That sort of changed things — only now you has to go and wipe your boots on both of us. I can stand it. It's killed your goose with her, though — unless you make up for it some way."

Hardy's eyes burned with eagerness. But he set his jaw and answered deliberately: "I cannot do otherwise than I have said."

"Mebbe not," admitted Dupont. "We don't look for you to, not unless you git to see how our way would be better for the tribe. There's plenty of time to talk about that. Mebbe now you'd like to take a look at the mine."

"Yes," crisply agreed Hardy.

Dupont rose, and led him into the mouth of the tunnel. There he unlocked a heavy tool-chest and took out two candles. These were needed, for though the tunnel ran into the mountain-side less than three hundred feet, its twisting course along the ore-vein soon shut out the daylight. Dupont noticed his companion's dubious look at the soft ore-body that formed the roof and one wall of the tunnel.

"Walk quiet, and don't talk loud," he said. "We ain't done no timbering yet. Drove in this drift to the foot of the shaft fast as we could git the lazy cusses to work, so's we could figure what we had to count on."

Hardy made no reply until they came to the end of the tunnel and stepped out into the dim daylight of the shaft bottom. He looked up the big, square, timbered well, and remarked: "You sunk this first, then drove in to meet it."

"Yep. Wanted to make sure the vein didn't pinch out nowhere. Nogen and Mr. Van both figured we got three hundred thousand dollars of ore as good as blocked out."

"Ah," said Hardy, and he signed to Dupont to lead the way back.

They had gone twenty-five or thirty paces when a little slither of ore fell on the floor of the tunnel in front of Dupont. Instantly he sprang forward, with a whispered cry: "Jump — quick!"

Hardy leaped after him, barely in time to clear the ton or more of ore that dropped from the roof in a mass. Without stopping to look behind them, the two men hastened stealthily down the slight slope of the tunnel, their candles upraised and eyes fixed on the soft, raw ore-body above them. At any moment the entire roof might cave in and bury them. The shock of the first fall loosened small quantities of ore all along the passage. Fragments dribbled down behind and in front of the fugitives and even on their heads.

Panic-stricken, they broke into a run. It was none too soon. As they dashed around the turn that brought them to the outlet, the entire roof behind them came thudding down.

Safe outside, Dupont shook the fragments from his hat and clothes, and pulled out his bandanna to wipe off the sweat that was gathering in beads on his forehead.

"Ugh!" he grunted. "Don't never see me in there ag'in till it's timbered."

"Rather close call," remarked Hardy.

"You're a cool one," muttered the trader, and he scowled. "*Nom d'un chien!* Just my luck! If I hadn't sung out, you'd 'a' got smashed under that first drop."

"I shall not forget it, Dupont."

"Me, neither. 'Stead of being rid of you, here you are ready as ever to clean us out — and I done it!"

"You do not regret saving my life," asserted Hardy.

"Well, mebbe not. Just the same, it's mighty hard luck on us. Here we went and blocked out all that there ore — three hundred thousand dollars as good as in our pockets — not to speak of all that's down under and t'other side the shaft. For all we know, it runs clean through the mountain and down to China!"

"That does not alter the situation," said Hardy.

"Mebbe it don't, and then ag'in —" Dupont

began to scratch his head. "Yes, mebbe it don't, and then, ag'in, mebbe it does. Just you take a look at it this way, Cap. You know the Government ain't going to pay the tribe much for all their mineral lands — you can bet on that. Well, now, here's this mine what we've developed enough to know it's worth anywhere from a million to three or four million. Well, suppose that new treaty goes through, the tribe don't git nothing out of this mine, and we don't, neither. Just some lucky bum beats us to it, and the Government says it's hisn. Is that fair and square?"

"You have acted outside the law," said Hardy. "You must take your chances with other locators."

"How about the tribe?" queried Dupont. "Don't you care nothing about their interests? Just you look at the facts, Cap. It ain't a matter of technicalities and lawyers; it's what's square and right to all concerned. Just supposing you and me and Mr. Van took hold of this here proposition for the tribe and split even with them on the proceeds. Wouldn't they be a sight better off than if they sell it and all their other mineral lands for what the Government will give 'em? I call that a square deal to them and us, too — and I know Marie would think the same. She likes you, Cap. Just show her you want to do what's best for all concerned, and I'm dead sure she —"

"Stop!" commanded Hardy. "Leave your daughter out of this."

"You've got to tell me how I'm going to do it," replied Dupont in an injured tone. "If I don't git my share in the mine, Mr. Van can't afford to take her; and you won't have no show. She won't never forgive you. It ain't as if she was all white. There's that streak of Injin blood in her. There ain't no 'turn the other cheek' in old Sitting Bull's blood. But you git in right with Marie, and she'd work her hands to the bone for you. She ain't no common breed girl, neither. You know that. She'd be a real lady, if she had money — only you ain't going to give her no chance."

"She knows that I wish to marry her," said Hardy.

"Think she believes that, when you're going to rob me and her of a fortune?"

Hardy looked directly at the tempter, his eyes clear and resolute, though his face was white and drawn. "It is of no use, Dupont. I shall do what I consider my duty."

Dupont's face darkened. "So that's what I git for saving your life. You ain't got a particle of gratitude, and you don't care a hang about her."

"I must beg to differ with you," said Hardy. "But I cannot expect you to understand my position."

Dupont drew out his pipe, and returned to his

seat on the mine-dump, to brood on his wrongs in morose silence. Hardy thoughtfully walked back to the cabin, beside which his saddle lay among the packs and other saddles of the party. His mare was picketed down in the valley with the ponies. He drew out a writing-pad from one of his saddle-bags and began to draft a semi-official letter to the most influential of his few acquaintances in Washington.

CHAPTER XVII

WORD OF HONOR

THE writer soon became so intent that he did not notice the half-dozen figures in dark blue uniform that came swinging down the precipitous mountain-side above the terrace. When at last he finished the letter and looked up, he saw all the members of the police escort drawn up in line before him, their swarthy faces alight with respectful friendliness. Their sergeant uttered a guttural word of salutation, and began making signs.

Hardy smiled, shook his head, and looked around for an interpreter. Dupont still sat sulking on the mine-dump. But Marie and Vandervyn were coming back up the mountain-side. They appeared only a few yards away, as Hardy glanced about. His lips drew tense when he perceived the girl's happy blushes and the look with which Vandervyn was regarding her half-averted face.

At sight of Hardy she straightened with proud disdain, and would have immediately gone around into the cabin had he not spoken.

"Pardon me, Miss Dupont. These men wish

to report to me. May I ask you to interpret for them? "

The girl turned coldly to the sergeant, who at once poured out an impassioned declamation, emphasized with swift-formed signs. He was still talking, when Dupont sullenly shambled over from the mine-dump. His discontented face darkened still more when he came within hearing of the speakers.

At last the sergeant finished his impromptu oration. Without looking at Hardy, Marie gave the substance of the speech with contemptuous curtness:

"He says they think you were very brave to follow the shooter into the broken mountain. They are very sorry that they could not again find the trail of the bad Indian after losing it on the bare rocks from which he must have shot Charlie. They found Charlie's trail coming to and going from the rocks, but nothing of the other's trail. He must have doubled back and escaped along the miles of stony ridges that stretch off in the opposite direction. The best trailers in the tribe could not track him there."

"Tell them that is all right. The fellow thought I was the enemy of his tribe. He will soon learn better. Neither he nor any other will again attack me."

"Yes, you have talked Thunderbolt into believing you the tribe's dearest friend," ironically replied Marie. "These silly fellows trailed you

to the chief's camp, and have swallowed whole the account of the wonderful good things you are going to do for the tribe. All this gush and fuss was over that and your big heart."

Regardless of the mockery in the girl's eyes, Hardy turned to smile and nod at the policemen in acknowledgment of their kindly feeling.

Dupont muttered a curse, and ventured an ill-humored remark loud enough to reach Hardy's ears: "The whole bunch'd sing a diff'rent tune if I told 'em how he turned down the chance to give the tribe half what's in our mine."

"Chuck it, Jake!" interposed Vandervyn, with a good-humored smile that surprised Hardy no less than the trader. "It's up to us to take our medicine. Marie and I have talked over the situation. The captain had no call to give us the gaff the way he did. But I take it he meant well. No doubt he means well about this new treaty. We know it will not be to the best interests of the tribe. The responsibility, however, is his."

"You ain't going to throw down, are you?" exclaimed Dupont.

"What else can we do?" mildly asked Vandervyn. "The game is up. All I can see to it is that the captain may do the honorable thing by 'us and suppress any detailed report of the mine. We then might be able to get here first and locate the property that we discovered and developed."

"What if the Government don't make it no rush, but has the entrymen draw lots?" objected Dupont. "I been fool enough to show Cap through the diggings and tell him what we got blocked out. If he ain't square enough to keep his head shut, we won't stand no chance at all of buying out the entryman what draws first choice in the lottery."

"You see, Captain," said Vandervyn. "As we discovered and developed the lode, do you not think the honorable thing would be to make no mention of the mine in your report?"

"The tribe should receive a large payment for their mineral lands," replied Hardy.

"Quite true," agreed Vandervyn, his voice ringing clear and strong with sincerity. "There was talk of paying them five millions. I think it should be fifteen or twenty. We have found indications of other lodes. I am sure you will see that it would be perfectly honorable to report that fact, but leave out all mention of our mine. That would protect us, and do no harm to the tribe. If you see it that way, I will pull all the wires I can to convince the Government that this part of the Reservation is rich in minerals. My uncle is chairman of the treaty commission. If his report favors a payment of fifteen or twenty millions to the tribe, Congress will appropriate that amount."

"If there are indications of other lodes as rich as this one, fifteen millions is none too large a

price," said Hardy. "You agree to help obtain fair compensation to the tribe?"

"Provided you do the fair and honorable thing by us," replied Vandervyn.

Hardy considered, and nodded. "Very well. As between you and the other entrymen, it seems to me right to withhold your secret. You found and developed this mine, and it is not the fault of yourself and Dupont that Nogen had the work done at the expense of the tribe."

"*Père* and Mr. Van will pay them for all the work," proudly stated Marie.

Dupont gaped in blank amazement at this unwelcome prediction. Not so Vandervyn.

"Of course we shall pay them, Captain," he confirmed. "I intend to list the claimants and the amount due them at the council tomorrow. Neither Jake nor I can afford to settle with them out of hand. But Jake will allow them part payment in trade goods, and we shall make other payments as fast as we get returns from our next ore shipments."

"Very good," agreed Hardy. "You are to understand, however, that the tribe must voluntarily bring the ore to the Reservation boundary and there sell it to you. Have you considered the risk of the public surmising the existence of the mine from the ore shipments?"

"No chance of that," explained Dupont. "Nogen let it out that he got the ore from a prospect in the mountains clean back across the

other boundary of the Reservation, and he showed around a smelter report of a shipment of ore what we'd doctored with barren rock so's it just paid out expenses."

Hardy did not smile. He returned gravely to Marie. "In view of the general agreement, Miss Dupont, may I hope that you —"

"You may not, Captain Hardy," she ungraciously interrupted. "You insulted my father. He and I shall at once leave for home."

Dupont looked to Vandervyn, and received a sign to acquiesce.

"Don't want to leave you in the lurch, Cap," he said. "But if Marie's set on going, guess I'll have to."

"Tell four of the police they are detailed to escort yourself and Miss Dupont back to the Agency," ordered Hardy. He raised his hat to Marie. "Permit me to wish you a pleasant journey."

The girl turned away without replying. Hardy stood for a moment cool and still under Vandervyn's exultant smile; then faced about, and steadily walked off along the mountain terrace.

He did not return to the cabin until the greater number of the saddle and pack ponies had been brought up from the valley and the returning party had mounted and ridden away on the back trail. Vandervyn started off with them, and Hardy's keen hazel eyes dimmed as, leaning

against a gnarled pine on the slope above, he watched the lovers ride away, side by side.

Angered at himself for his momentary weakness, he sprang down the ledges to the terrace, and hastened back to talk with Redbear. He was met at the cabin door by Oinna, who placed a finger on her lips and whispered that her brother had at last fallen asleep.

Hardy withdrew to the shady side of the cabin, where he sat down on his saddle and began drafting a list of instructions for the tribal delegates to Washington. He was still writing when, shortly before nightfall, Vandervyn came jogging back to the mine. He had had a delightful ride with Marie, and he complacently intimated the fact to Hardy.

In the midst of this subtle tormenting of his rival, Oinna came out to serve the supper that she had cooked in the cabin. Vandervyn abruptly changed the subject, and began to talk about the council next day. Hardy gave no sign that he observed this sudden break or the furtive, adoring glances that the girl bestowed on Vandervyn as she glided softly to and fro.

The night came on, clear and still. As they puffed at their after-supper pipes, Vandervyn suggested that, out of consideration for the young woman, they roll up in their blankets outside the cabin. To this Hardy made no objection. They picked out a soft spot matted with fallen pine

needles, under a low-growing tree, and soon both were seemingly fast asleep.

After several minutes Vandervyn spoke to his companion in a low tone. Hardy did not answer. Vandervyn drew out his pipe and struck a match. He held the flame above Hardy's face. The eyes were closed, and the severe, half-melancholy expression of the harsh features was relaxed as if in heavy slumber.

Vandervyn extinguished the match, and slipped out of his blankets. Noiselessly he crept down to the cabin and around to the door. It was barred on the inside. He tapped on it, and whispered impatiently: "Hurry up, you silly fool — open the door! You might have known I'd be coming in."

Within the cabin a timid voice called back breathlessly: "Yes, yes, I'm coming! But him? I thought you didn't want him to know yet."

"Don't worry about him," jeered Vandervyn. "The old fossil is sleeping like a log. Hurry up and draw that bar."

There was a sliding sound within the cabin, and the heavy door began to swing inward. Vandervyn put his foot on the threshold to enter. At the same moment a sinewy hand gripped his shoulder and jerked him away. He cursed, and clapped his hand to his holster as he whirled about. It was empty. He bent forward to spring at the dark form in the half-open doorway.

"Stand back!" came the stern command. "I have your revolver. Oinna, close the door."

The door swung shut. In the tense silence the rattle of the bar as it shot back into its socket was distinct. Vandervyn's teeth ground together.

"You — straight-laced — prig!" he choked out. "Get away from here! I'm going in."

"No," said Hardy. "Have you no shame? — no sense of honor? Today making your representations to *her*, and now trying to take advantage of this poor girl's infatuation!"

"*Bah!* what a bleat over a squaw!" sneered Vandervyn. "Isn't her brother in there? What the devil have you got to say about it?"

"If Redbear is such a degenerate, he should be in the guardhouse," rejoined Hardy. "As for you, I shall require your word to leave his sister alone."

"Suppose I do not choose to give it?"

"Then I will protect her by ordering you to leave the Reservation as fast as you can travel."

"I see," taunted Vandervyn. "You want to get rid of me, so you can have clear sailing with Marie. You're a great one to spout about honor! You'll go and blat to her about this."

"You know very well I cannot do that. Yet if you refuse to give me your word, I shall feel justified in telling Dupont my reason for ordering you off the Reservation."

Vandervyn burst into a cynical laugh. "D'you

think Jake's the sort to care about a little affair of this kind? "

" When the happiness of his daughter is at stake — "

" Precisely. He thinks I'm her one best chance. He'd shove her on me if I had a hundred squaws."

" Very well," replied Hardy. " Since, like this poor girl's, her natural guardian is unfit, my position as acting agent requires me to take his place. My appeal to you as a gentleman having failed, I must conclude that you are not a gentleman. I shall be compelled to disclose this incident to Miss Dupont. You shall be escorted off the Reservation under arrest."

" You'll tell her! " cried Vandervyn, and again he bent forward as if to leap at his rival. Hardy stood cold and motionless in the dim starlight. The younger man checked himself. His voice shook with suppressed anger: " You've got the drop on me now. Wait till we hear from Washington."

" Until I am relieved from my present detail, I shall consider myself the guardian of Miss Dupont and this innocent, ignorant girl," stated Hardy.

There followed a silence of several moments' duration, in which Vandervyn must have found time to reflect. He drew back a step or two, lit his pipe, and at last remarked in a somewhat forced tone of conciliation: " I see you're like an army mule — no use trying to budge you when

you balk. I give you my word to act as a gentleman in this affair."

"Very well," replied Hardy.

Vandervyn started off, sucking at his pipe. Hardy turned about, and locked the door on the outside with the heavy padlock that hung loose in the jamb staple. He put the key in his pocket, and walked around the cabin to make certain that there were no other openings larger than the narrow crevices of the loopholes.

When he returned to the tree, he found Vandervyn already outstretched. He picked up his blankets and moved down the slope, to spend the night in the more congenial company of the two remaining Indian policemen.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHITE AND BLACK

IN the morning Oinna was too timid to show herself outside the cabin, though Hardy called a kindly good morning to her when he freed the padlock. Her brother, with one arm carefully bandaged and in a sling, brought out the breakfast that she cooked. He looked so weak and unsteady that Hardy at once assented when he mumbled that he wished to go back to bed and rest until the council.

"You must have your wits about you this time," added Hardy. "Whatever the cause of the misunderstanding at the first council, it must not recur. You are too careless in your interpretations. Inform your sister that she is to be present. I shall require her to check you."

"Would you make a girl as shy as she is stand up in a tribal council and interpret?" remonstrated Vandervyn, as Redbear slunk around the end of the cabin.

"The presence of her grandfather will give her courage," replied Hardy. "It is necessary that she should be present. I do not trust either the ability or the honesty of her brother."

Vandervyn shrugged, and said no more. Half

an hour or so later he asked permission to use Hardy's pen and pad to write some letters. The captain handed them to him, and started up the mountain-side above the tunnel mouth. A steep path led up to the top of the spur ridge from which the shaft had been sunk from the apex of the outcrop of the vein.

As soon as he had gone beyond earshot, Vandervyn rose to stretch himself and call softly through the nearest loophole. He then seated himself on his saddle and began to write. At intervals he paused as if to consider, and occasionally he spoke aloud, his eyes always down-bent on the writing-pad. Even had his voice carried up the mountain-side, Hardy must have inferred from his attitude that he was shaping in spoken words the ideas that he wished to write. A listener would have had need to be near at hand to have heard the low murmur of Redbear's and Oinna's voices through the loophole above Vandervyn's head.

When Hardy returned from his examination of the upper works of the mine, Vandervyn sealed in his presence the two letters that he had written. They appeared decidedly thin, in view of the time that Vandervyn had spent in his writing and the number of sheets of paper gone from the pad. But Hardy did not observe this. His attention had been diverted by a large party of Indians that had appeared on the velvety green meadows of the valley bottom.

The tribal council had begun to assemble. This time the chiefs and headmen did not come alone. From far camps as well as near, men and women and children were trailing down out of the high mountains. Old Ti-owa-konza's runners had carried the welcome message of peace and friendship, and many of the men of the tribe were bringing their families to see the Longknife chief whom they had first hated but now believed to be their friend and father.

The first comers were soon followed by others. From every direction the scattered bands came straggling into the valley, down mountain-slopes and out of clefts and gulches. By noon their numbers had grown from scores to hundreds.

Shortly after the midday meal one of the Indian policemen brought word up to the cabin that the head chief had arrived and the council was ready to talk with the agent. The other policeman had already fetched the horses. Hardy at once gave command to mount. Oinna still shrank from sight in the cabin, but as soon as Hardy and Vandervyn started to ride down the slope, she slipped out, and held her brother's pony for him. She then mounted her own, and rode after him.

At the foot of the slope the riders came out through a grove of young quaking aspens into sudden view of the picturesque and imposing tribal council. Fully half the tribe had gathered together for the occasion. All up and down the

valley the meadows were dotted with their ponies. The Indians were assembled in a dense crowd — the men in a deep band around the chiefs, the women and children outside.

Hardy was greeted with a murmur of welcome and admiration, and the crowd made a path through their midst to the inner ring of the chiefs. Hardy dismounted, and ordered the horses left in the charge of the two policemen. Followed by Redbear, Vandervyn, and Oinna, he walked along the passage between the living walls of silent, furtive-eyed Indians, and seated himself on the blanket that had been spread for him beside old Ti-owa-konza. Shortly before the start down into the valley Vandervyn had again borrowed his superior's writing-pad and fountain-pen. He now sat down at Hardy's shoulder, with the pad and pen ready.

After a ceremonious silence the head chief's crier announced the purpose of the council. This was followed by declamations from three orators, whose main purpose seemed to be to give an exhibition of their ability in painting word-pictures. When they had finished, Ti-owa-konza arose, and warmed the hearts of his people with an impassioned eulogy of their new friend, the chief of the Longknives, who had come to be a father to the tribe.

Hardy then explained the good that had resulted on other Reservations from the taking of land in severalty, and advised that the council

name a delegation of chiefs to go on at once to Washington and ask for the confirmation of the new treaty. More than once during Redbear's interpretation of the acting agent's statements Oinna betrayed surprise. Ti-owa-konza noticed this sooner than Hardy. He spoke to his granddaughter. The girl cast a timid look at Vandervyn and hesitated.

Her brother smiled cunningly and said: "It's all right. Tell him."

"What's that?" queried Hardy.

"Nothing — nothing, sir," quavered the girl.

"Only, Charlie — he added something to what you said."

"I put in that you and Mr. Van would try to get them big pay for the mineral lands," boldly explained Redbear.

"Surely, you've no objection to that, Captain," remarked Vandervyn.

"Was that all?" Hardy asked the girl.

"Yes, sir. He only —"

"Very well. I have no objection to the statement. But I now must decidedly insist upon an exact interpretation of what I say. Miss Redbear, you will tell me at once if your brother either fails to interpret what I tell him or makes any additions."

"Ye-s, sir, if —" faltered Oinna. Her covert glance of appeal met with a reassuring smile from Vandervyn. She ventured to look up at Hardy, and her voice became steadier: "Yes,

sir, of course. Only Charlie was just trying to help, and he won't do it again."

Hardy resumed his explanations and advice. When he had finished, several more orators had to exhibit their eloquence. The council then proceeded to accept the acting agent's advice and name a delegation. As Ti-owa-konza insisted that he was too old to venture so long a journey among the white men, five of the younger sub-chiefs and headmen were chosen to represent the tribe.

During the closing ceremonies of the council Vandervyn leaned forward beside Hardy, and showed him an abbreviated but accurate memorandum of the proceedings.

"It's as well to have these things in black and white," he suggested. "We could get the chiefs to sign this before the council breaks up."

"Very good. A record may be valuable for future reference," agreed Hardy.

He rapidly read the writing, interpolated a few words, added a line, and gave it to Redbear to interpret. When the council acknowledged the accuracy of the memorandum, Hardy signed it, and asked the chiefs to add their marks, with Redbear and Oinna acting as witnesses. At this Vandervyn volunteered to serve as penman, and officiously ordered Redbear to bring the chiefs over to a nearby boulder, where they could more conveniently make their marks on the paper.

Hardy offered no objection to this. The council had finished its work, and there was nothing

suspicious about Vandervyn's suggestion that the boulder would afford an easy place for the chiefs to sign. He rose and returned to his mare, while the crowd flocked off to the boulder after their chiefs. He did not see Vandervyn lay out two papers on the top of the rock, nor did he hear the smooth explanation that the agent wanted the chiefs to sign two copies of the memorandum. This statement was unhesitatingly interpreted by Redbear, and the chiefs, who knew by experience that most Agency papers were signed in duplicate, made their crosses and thumb-prints as fast as Vandervyn wrote their names on the two papers.

Oinna ventured to whisper to her brother that the papers did not look alike. He hastily repeated the remark to Vandervyn. The girl cringed close to her grandfather. But Vandervyn showed no anger. He smiled at her in a manner that brought a blissful glow into her soft eyes, and explained that one paper gave the proceedings of the council in full, while the other consisted of brief notes. He then murmured to her something that at first brought a shadow into her joyous face, but in the end left her radiant with happiness.

When the leading men of the tribe had signed the papers and Redbear and Oinna had attested as witnesses, Vandervyn thrust the documents into his pocket and went alone to rejoin Hardy. As he handed over the paper that Hardy had

signed, he remarked that, if there was no objection, Redbear and his sister would remain in the mountains with their grandfather until word should be received from the Government for the tribal delegation to come on to Washington.

"You are ready to return to the Agency with me?" asked Hardy.

"We can start at once, if you wish," assented Vandervyn.

"Very well," said Hardy. "The girl shall remain here, and you will come with me."

Vandervyn shrugged, smiled good-humoredly, and vaulted into his saddle.

Still doubtful of his companion, Hardy took the pories of Redbear and Oinna in lead, and rode over to where the brother and sister stood in the midst of their grandfather's immediate family. When the girl confirmed Vandervyn's statement that she wished to remain in the mountains, he took ceremonious leave of the noble old chief, and rode off to rejoin his party.

During the brief interval Vandervyn's gay humor had disappeared. He met Hardy with a frown, and held out one of the letters that he had written that morning. Seeing that it was addressed to himself, Hardy tore open the envelope and read the brief note within.

"So," he said, fixing the younger man with a level glance, "your resignation — to take effect at once. It is dated yesterday."

"It would have been dated and presented a

week ago if I'd had the slightest idea you were going to insult me as you did yesterday," Vandervyn burst out angrily. "You'd have had it on the spot if I could have brought myself to borrow your pen and paper."

"I see," said Hardy. He reflected a moment, and remarked: "There seems to be no reason why I should not accept your resignation, if you insist upon my acting on it."

"I do," said Vandervyn. "I've had enough of your bullying. I'm a free man now — not your clerk."

"You will change your tone, sir, if you wish to ride in my company," said Hardy, with a cool self-control that checked the other's anger.

"Lord! if only you weren't such a self-righteous prig!" exclaimed the younger man. "You're so sure you can show cards and spades to the angels! I'm out for the good things of life, and I make no bones over it. But that doesn't prevent me from being a blooming benefactor as well. If you wish to know the real reason why I'm resigning, it's because I have planned to go on to Washington with the delegation, and pull wires to get the tribe a big slice of graft for their mineral lands."

Hardy saw the frank sincerity in his companion's eyes, and responded to the assertion with an instant apology: "Mr. Vandervyn, I beg your pardon for misjudging you. At times your con-

duct has been ill advised, but I no longer doubt your good intentions."

"It takes an officer and gentleman to eat crow as if it were quail!" rallied Vandervyn with seemingly genial sarcasm. "Do I understand that my resignation is accepted?"

"If you insist."

"I do. Now that is settled. We make the return trip as equals," said Vandervyn, and, as if freed from all rancor by the thought, he fell into a mood of suave gaiety.

CHAPTER XIX

A LOVER'S PROMISE

WHEN, mid-afternoon of the next day, the two white men and the pair of Indian police emerged from the canyon of Sioux Creek into the Agency valley, Vandervyn was still as gay and good-humored as at the start of the journey. He even volunteered to intervene for Hardy with Marie.

"There's no other boarding-house short of town, and baching is no fun," he replied to Hardy's objections. "Besides, Marie will be willing to forgive you when she learns that we are no longer at outs."

"It is very kind of you to make the offer," replied Hardy in rather a stiff tone. "If Dupont is at home, may I ask you to send him to the office?"

"Certainly," replied Vandervyn, and all the way down to the Agency he chatted genially. When they came to the level behind the warehouse, he waved his hand in friendly parting. "S'long. See you later. Be sure to chop off your whiskers in time for supper. You'll need to look your best."

He cut across towards the Dupont house with-

out stopping at his own cabin. Evidently he considered that he would be welcome even if he did not wait to groom himself.

Dupont soon clumped into the Agency office, fairly oozing with jovial friendliness.

"Howdy! Howdy, Cap!" he greeted. "Mighty glad to see you back all h' aydory. Mr. Van told us how well everything come out and how you and him are pulling together now. Marie, she says she'll look to see you at supper. Mr. Van says you wanted to see me. Anything I can do, Cap, just call on me. Hard words break no bones, and I'm ready to own up we might've told you more about Nogen. I'm ready to call quits now, if you are."

Hardy accepted the proffered hand, and exchanged a cordial grip.

"This pleases me very much, Dupont," he responded. "We will all now work together for the tribe. I give you my best wishes that you may win the money."

"We got a fair show to, seeing as how you ain't going to let on about it in your report. Now, just tell me what I can do for you."

"Merely a few words as interpreter," said Hardy. "I wish one of the police at once to ride over to the railroad with these telegrams and letters. The sooner I receive instructions to send the delegation to Washington, the better."

"That's no lie. Mr. Van says the money can't be appropriated till Congress meets, but the

treaty is fixed up so's the amount can be settled on and the Reservation ordered divided up by the treaty commission."

"Ah!" exclaimed Hardy. "We may get the agricultural lands allotted in time for the planting of winter wheat. Come; we will send off these telegrams and letters."

Since the return of the party from the mountains, not one of the police but was more than willing to serve the new agent. Two of the younger men were soon cantering away down the valley on their best ponies, proud of the fact that they had been chosen to make the night ride to the railroad.

Hardy returned to the office with Dupont, and became deeply absorbed in discussing ways and means for the development of the Indians as farmers. When Dupont noted the hour, there seemed scarcely time for even one of the captain's quick-change toilets. Yet he appeared at the door of the Dupont house, spick and span and his beard clean shaven, without having required his hostess to wait supper a half-minute.

As he entered in response to Dupont's hospitable bellow, there was a perceptible hesitancy in his manner. Marie was seated at the far end of the room near Vandervyn. She rose, and came forward to greet Hardy, her chin proudly up-tilted.

"There seems to have been a general misunderstanding of motives, Captain," she remarked

with frank directness. "I still consider that you were unduly harsh, but I now understand that you meant well and perhaps had some excuse. Reggie says that we are all to work together for the good of the tribe."

"It pleases me very much to hear you say it," he replied. "I believe that within a year we shall see an immense improvement in the condition of the tribe."

"What interest have you in helping them?" she queried, evidently reluctant to believe his motives unselfish.

"It means a good mark on his official record," bantered Vandervyn. "Every little thing counts on promotion — like merit marks at school."

"You see!" agreed Hardy. "I can't pretend to altruism. I am ambitious to stand well in my profession. If I make a good showing when given a detail, I put merit marks on my record, as Mr. Vandervyn has so aptly expressed it."

Marie's challenging gaze softened, and she looked thoughtfully down at her white hands.

"Isn't even self-sacrifice a form of selfishness?" she murmured.

The appearance of the Indian boy in the dining-room doorway checked Hardy's reply.

During supper the girl remained unusually thoughtful and silent. Hardy resumed with Dupont the discussion of plans for the instruction of the tribe in agriculture. The idea had occurred to him that the Government might permit him to

build an irrigation system for the farming lands of the tribe, using Indian laborers, and paying for the work out of the money appropriated for the sale of the mineral lands.

When Vandervyn chose to listen to Hardy's unfolding of his plans, it was with a half-amused smile that did not always cover the underlying cynical irony. Most of the time he devoted himself to an attempt to rally Marie out of her thoughtfulness. Instead of responding, she became more pensive. Hardy probably attributed the girl's half-somber quietness to his presence. As they left the supper-table, he asked Dupont to come to the office, that they might consult reports on the allotment of lands in severalty at other Reservations.

Marie and Vandervyn followed them as far as the parlor, where the young man dropped into the easiest chair, with a disgusted: "Lord! he makes me weary — all that benevolent blatter!"

"Of course he is doing it merely to help himself in his career," murmured Marie.

"Or to get the handling of the tribal funds," suggested Vandervyn. "There'll be a fat slice of graft for somebody out of all those millions."

"You really think that?"

"What else can you expect — Government on one side and Poor Lo on the other? It's the usual thing. I expect to get my share."

"You?" exclaimed the girl, her eyes widening with a look of astonishment and reproach.

Vandervyn laughed amusedly. "Wait a bit before you dig up your tomahawk, Miss Sitting Bull. I've told you why I resigned my position. I've not got a snug job for life, as has Hardy; I can't afford to do my benevolent work for nothing. If I succeed in getting the tribe fifteen or twenty millions, instead of the five that was talked about, it strikes me they could afford to allow yours truly a nice little percentage as commission."

"Oh, Reggie, pardon me! Of course you should have good pay for proving yourself such a friend to the tribe."

"And to each member of the tribe!" he added, his blue eyes glowing golden with ardor. "I don't want all my pay in money. How about an advance royalty in — something else?"

He had risen, and was coming towards her. She blushed and retreated around the tea-table.

"No, no," she remonstrated. "I told you we must wait until — until you are freed from your — cousin."

"Wait?" he rejoined. "You're trying to play me against that tinfoil hero. Do you think I'm going to stand for that? You didn't hear your father tell you that old Hardy has rushed off his telegrams to Washington. I'll have to go on at once, and fix things so that the delegation will not have to hang round the Capitol all winter."

"You will have to leave before the delega-

tion?" The girl was almost dismayed at the unexpectedness of the announcement.

"I'll have to go at once," stated Vandervyn, frowning. "I thought of course he would have told me before sending his messages. I could have so worded them for him that the game would have started off without a hitch. As it is, I can't take any chances. I must leave tomorrow."

"But if you should telegraph?"

"That may help. It's odds, though, he has messed things up in a way that will require the presence of a good lobbyist to pull off the game in any kind of shape to suit us."

"I do not like the way you speak of it — a game, lobbying," murmured Marie.

Vandervyn smiled condescendingly. "My dear girl, you know nothing about such matters. I was secretary to my uncle long enough to get next on the peculiarities of Government business. A crooked deal can twist through the devious ways of Congress and the Departments without trouble. An honest, straightforward matter, such as this treaty, needs strong pulling to get as far as the President's signature."

"What a terrible thing to say of your own Government!"

"Oh, well, I know your sympathies are all Canadian. I've no need to set up as a patriot with you."

"But you will use only honest methods in your lobbying?"

"What else?" queried Vandervyn, his eyes wide and guileless. "I wish to earn my commission all free and above-board. You need not be surprised, however, if a big slice of graft is deducted from the amount appropriated to pay the tribe."

"How dishonest! They would rob the tribe!"

"Not at all. When the price for the mineral lands has been screwed up to the highest notch I and my friends can lift it, that amount will be fixed upon to go to the tribe, and a percentage will be added to pay the — let us say — the expenses of those who manage the appropriation bill."

"But that is not honest to the people of the United States."

"It's the only way to get the tribe a just price for their mineral lands. Don't look so shocked, Miss Canada. It's the regular way such things are handled in all representative governments — ours, the Canadian and English parliaments, the German, the French — all the same."

The girl's eyes clouded. "I do not like to hear you speak in that cynical tone."

"Oh, it's not because I don't believe in democratic government. In despotic countries the regular procedure would be for the officials to take the bulk of the appropriation, and give the tribe the percentage — or nothing."

"I cannot believe that even your Government

will permit its officials to rob either the tribe or the people of the country," declared Marie. "There cannot be a majority of dishonest Congressmen."

"No; the big majority are honest fools. They are managed by means of committees and the plea of party loyalty and log-rolling. But that's not my fault, sweetheart. You know I — "

"I know you've yet to receive permission to call me that!" broke in the girl.

Vandervyn bit his lip. "You forget I am going away."

"Back to Washington — and your *fiancée*!"

"Quite true. And I'm going to stay, unless there is some inducement for me to return here," he rejoined.

It was Marie's turn to bite her lip. "How can you say that, when you know that I — that I — "

"I know you've been coquetting with me ever since Hardy came," he charged.

At the betrayal of jealousy the girl recovered her aplomb. "Is that quite fair, when you admitted that you are engaged to your cousin?"

"I told you how it was, and why I cannot break off with her until — " He stepped nearer, his eyes aglow with passionate allurements. "You know I love you, only you, Marie! And you love me, sweetheart! You're the loveliest girl in all the world. Be kind to me! You cannot let me go away without some proof of your love —

something to draw me back, to compel me to return to you."

Under the enticement of his soft eyes and pleading voice, all her reserve melted. Instead of eluding his advance, she swayed forward, and permitted him to take her in his arms. He crushed her to him, and showered kisses on her lips and blushing cheeks — upon her silken eyelids when they drooped to hide the love-light in her glorious eyes — upon her dusky hair when, overcome, she pressed her face against his shoulder.

He quivered with the joy of mastery and possession. "You are mine — mine! Say it!"

"I — I will marry you!" she whispered.

Submissive and loving as was the reply, it struck the ardent smile from Vandervyn's face. His embrace relaxed, and for a moment he stood staring over the girl's head, his lip between his teeth.

"I — love — you!" she murmured, quick to sense the change that had come upon him.

At the candid confession his eyes again glowed, and again he crushed her to him.

"You love me! You own it!" he cried. "You are mine!"

"Yours!" she panted, and she threw back her head to meet his gaze.

"Mine — now!" he whispered.

"No!"

With a sudden violent thrust for which he was

all unprepared, she burst from his clasp and sprang clear of him.

"What is it?" he muttered, staring at her, half bewildered.

Her face was pale, but she met his look with a steady glance, and her lips were tense with resolution. "You asked for proof of my love. I have given you full proof."

"Have you, though?" he questioned, and again he sought to come close to her, his eyes glowing with allurements. "Sweetheart! Do you not trust me? Give me the real proof of your love — now!"

Held fast by the fascination of his gaze, she stood palpitating with emotion while he came closer and still closer. His quivering fingers stroked her arm with a caressing touch. She thrilled, and a rosy blush flooded her pale cheeks; the fringes of her black lashes sank to veil the blissful tenderness in her eyes. He gave a suppressed cry of exultance, and opened his arms to seize her. Instinctively she flung up her elbow. It caught him under the chin, as he thrust forward. He staggered back from her, gasping, his hands on his throat.

"Oh!" she cried. "I did not mean — You should not have —"

"You — didn't in — tend?" he choked out.

"You know it!" she answered. "It was the way you — Oh! how could you?" She put up her hands, like a child, to hide the scarlet that

flamed in her cheeks. "Go, please go! You have made me tell — And I have promised to marry you — when you come back."

"If I do come back," qualified Vandervyn in a flash of chagrin.

Marie drew herself up to her full height, the color ebbing from her face. Her voice was as cold as her eyes. "Do you wish to free me from my promise?"

"Never!" he burst out. "You'd give yourself to Hardy. He sha'n't have you. You've promised — you said it."

"Not now — not yet — not until you come back to me, free from your cousin. Leave me, I asked you to go."

"What! This way? At least you will give me another kiss, sweetheart?"

"Go at once, else I shall refuse to see you in the morning."

When he perceived the look in her eyes, he picked up his hat, and left the house without attempting to argue.

She closed the door, and hastened into her dainty little bedroom, to sink on her knees before the crucifix at the foot of the bed.

CHAPTER XX

THE FIGHTING CHANCE

TO catch the eastbound express without lying over night and nearly all the following day in town, Vandervyn had to start from the Agency before dawn. But Marie was up an hour earlier, and sent her father over to make sure that her lover came for the breakfast she had prepared for him. While he ate, she stocked his saddlebags for the trip, and gave the pinto a good feed of oats.

He tried to see her alone, and failed. She was too clever for him. But when he went out to mount, she permitted him a single parting kiss in the presence of her father.

Dupont had saddled one of his own ponies to "ride out" with the traveler. As they jogged down the road in the dim starlight, he bit off a "chaw" of plug tobacco, squinted at the vague form of his companion, and chuckled.

"What's the joke?" irritably queried Vandervyn.

"'Tain't no joke, Mr. Van. Just the same, it tickles me to know you and Marie has agreed to hitch up."

"Who said anything about an agreement?" snapped the young man.

"Now, now, keep on your shirt!" soothed Dupont. "Mebbe you ain't signed papers. It's all right, though. You needn't worry none. Marie wouldn't never have let you kiss her if she didn't intend to take you."

Vandervyn suddenly changed his tone: "I'm glad to hear you say it, Jake. You see, she does not altogether like the idea of keeping quiet about our engagement — our betrothal, you would say in Canada. But if Hardy should hear of it, he probably would notify my uncle. Then good-bye mine and all."

"Um!" grunted Dupont.

"Mine and all!" repeated Vandervyn. "I've told you why. I want Marie, and I'm going to have her if you and she keep this quiet for a while. I'll fix it so we'll get the mine and maybe something else — and I'll fix Hardy!"

"Didn't know you was still so down on him. Wasn't it all smoothed over? You been acting that way."

"Wait and see me rub his fur the *other* way! I'll put over a game on him that —" Vandervyn checked the disclosure, and began asking questions about the traits of the five chiefs chosen as tribal delegates.

Half an hour after sunrise Dupont came jogging back home, his heavy face set in a satisfied grin. The complacency of his look lessened when

he entered, and saw the Indian boy removing the evidences of some one's solitary meal. He knocked at his daughter's door. After quite a delay she called to him that he might enter. He found her seated at the foot of the bed, with a little leather-bound book in her lap. Though her eyelids were swollen, she met him with her usual look of quiet self-possession.

"You let Cap eat alone," he remarked.
 "Don't call that being hospit'le, do you?"

"If he had been more considerate, Reggie could have remained until the delegation leaves," coldly replied the girl.

"Well, we got to keep in with him till Mr. Van gits things fixed. You see, if he gits mad and reports on us to Washington, we'll git kicked off the Reservation and barred from any chance of the mine."

"Did Reggie say that?"

"Yep. It's why, he says, he leaves it to you to keep quiet about the engagement. If you let on about it to Hardy, he's likely to git jealous and put Senator Clemmer next. That would queer the whole deal at this stage of the game."

"I do not believe that Captain Hardy would do such a thing," declared the girl.

"All right. Mr. Van leaves it to you to tell him, if you want to. Guess Cap means well; but he sure has made plenty of trouble a'ready, and he can easy head off Mr. Van from gitting back

here. Most men won't stick at nothing when it comes a chance of gitting a girl 'ike you. I ain't saying Cap mayn't be a straight-laced in everything else. But when it comes to being dead gone on a girl like you, and at his age, too — needn't tell me he won't do his level best to put Mr. Van out of the running any way he can."

The girl sprang up, her eyes afire with a flare of unreasoning anger.

"He shall not!" she cried. "Reggie is coming back!"

"He won't have no chance to if it leaks out about you and him going to git married."

"Married!" The angry scarlet of the girl's cheeks deepened to rose. Notes of indignation and joy mingled oddly in her half-murmured prediction: "He will come back! That meddler shall not prevent!"

"You won't go and git Cap down on us, will you?" remonstrated Dupont.

"Wait and see," she replied.

He did not see that noon. Hardy had ridden off alone, and did not return to the Agency until sundown. When, at the usual supper hour, he presented himself at the Dupont door, his bearing was reserved and somewhat diffident. Dupont, who was alone in the parlor, genially bade him enter. But Hardy lingered in the doorway until Marie appeared.

"Pardon me, Miss Dupont," he said, as he met her look of surprise. "I came to say that

if you do not consider it worth while to board me, I can make shift for myself."

"Indeed, but you shall not!" exclaimed the girl with a graciousness that brought a glow into his grave face. "What should we do without your company at table?"

"You are very kind to say it."

She smiled. "Where have you been keeping yourself all day?"

"I rode up Wolf River to the falls. A canal to irrigate a large area could be led down from there, and later on I believe a dam could be constructed above the falls at a comparatively small cost. It would convert the valley above into a large storage reservoir, to hold the winter floods."

"You must show me your plans at the falls themselves!" declared Marie with an enthusiasm more gratifying to him than would have been a personal compliment.

They went in to supper, earnestly discussing his plans for the betterment of the tribe.

So began the second period of his close companionship with the girl, and the intimacy appeared as sincere and friendly as the first one, when Vandervyn was in the mountains with Redbear. Almost every day they rode out to examine the Wolf River watershed, and estimate as best they could without surveying instruments the number of acres that could be put under ditch.

Hardy had at once written for reports on similar undertakings. Before receiving them he

was agreeably surprised by an official telegram from Washington instructing him to at once send on the tribal delegation, in the charge of Redbear. So swift an unreeling of Governmental red tape proved that powerful influences were favoring the consummation of the new treaty. Hardy ungrudgingly gave Vandervyn the credit of being a very successful benevolent lobbyist.

A runner was despatched to bring in Redbear and the delegates. They came without delay. Redbear's arm was so nearly healed that he had full use of it. Oinna did not accompany him. He said their grandfather had become so fond of her that he had insisted upon her remaining in the mountains until the return of the delegation from Washington. Marie offered to send for her and give her a home while her brother was away, but Redbear hastily declared that the girl wished to stay with the old chief.

Hardy took charge of the delegation as far as the railroad, and Marie and Dupont went along to keep him company. He provided for the comfort aboard train of Redbear and the five solemn chiefs, and shipped them off with through tickets to Washington and a careful set of instructions to help them in the conduct of their mission.

"My only wish is that I might go with them," he remarked, as the "iron horse" whirled them away towards the land of the sunrise. "They will be like the Babes in the Woods."

"You sure have done your level best for them,

Cap," replied Dupont. "You ain't got no license to worry nohow. Mr. Van is there to boost 'em along."

"Besides, you have your work here," added Marie with a glance that completely diverted his thoughts.

They spent the night in the rough shack misnamed a hotel, and at dawn started on their return to the Agency. As Dupont's pony was continually lagging behind, Hardy had the pleasure of Marie's company virtually alone for the greater part of the ride. She seemed to enjoy this quite as much as he, and remained in gracious good-humor even through the blazing heat of midday. Nor did she allow herself to feel fatigue until, after their arrival at the Agency, she had cooked a savory supper, and then entertained Hardy for an hour or more in her artistic little parlor.

The next day, fresh as ever, she was ready to ride up to the falls and help him run a line of levels with the instruments that he had hired in town. Never had he known any one so abounding in life. Mentally as well as physically, she seemed ever tireless, buoyant, animated.

Day after day they worked and planned for the good of the tribe; day after day her graciousness towards him increased. And day after day his love for her deepened and strengthened until it could be seen in his every look and act, and heard in every inflection of his voice when he

spoke to her. Though her manner towards him showed no trace of overt coquetry, she made no effort to repulse his silent devotion or to check the growth of his passion.

A week after the departure of the delegation found him fully looking the part of a gallant lover — ardent, youthful, almost handsome. The forced stiffness of his carriage, which had hinted at suppressed lassitude, had given place to the easy erectness of buoyant vigor. His once sallow cheeks were now healthily ruddy under their tan. He had lost much of his former look of pensive severity. Even the silvery hairs over his temples seemed to be regaining their original ruddy brown.

A few days later, one of the lines of levels happened to bring him and the girl to the edge of the coulée, across from the butte. He suggested that they go down and across to the spring rill for a drink.

As they turned back, Marie recognized the exact spot where he had been shot. Womanlike, she shuddered and turned pale at the recollection, though at the time of the occurrence she had been so brave.

“Look!” she said in a half-whisper. “Here is where you fell. I thought you were killed!”

“The experience was well worth while,” he replied. His voice shook with the irresistible passion of his love. “Dearest!—let me call you that here, this once! It was here I first

looked into the depths of your heart, and learned how good and kind you are."

The girl turned to hide her face from the reverent adoration of his gaze.

"No, no," she murmured. "Don't, please!"

"I must speak, dear," he replied. "I ask nothing of you. It is only that I wish to tell you how you made me realize again that life is worth living. When I came from the Coast, I had lost one dearer to me than any one else in all the world—my mother. She was a little woman, very frail—her blue eyes were dim and faded, her hair white; but even when she—was at the very end—her dear eyes sought to ease my grief with the same look you gave me as you bent over me here and thought me fatally injured."

"Please!" begged the girl, choking back a sob. "I do not deserve—Your mother!—but I am not kind nor good!"

Hardy went on in the same voice of profound passion: "You lifted me out of the shadow of the Valley. You came to me in my blank darkness, a glorious light of divine goodness that compelled me to see that all was not wrong with the universe,—that even so great a loss as mine might be for the best."

"I am not what you think me—I am not!" she reiterated.

"You restored my faith and hope," he insisted. "It would be selfish of me to ask anything more of you now—"

"It would be useless — useless!" she cried.

He was too little versed in feminine nature to realize that her vehemence might indicate an effort to suppress an inner doubt of the assertion. Had he been a few years younger, youthful impetuosity might have won him that which his reverent respect shrank from urging. He had taken her gloved hand. He pressed it to his lips, and freed her.

"I shall not annoy you, dear," he said. "Yet I cannot take that as final. I shall wait until he returns. Then I shall take my fighting chance."

"You will?" she whispered.

"I shall not give up until you have pledged yourself to him. If I can, I will prevent that. He cannot possibly love you as I love you. If it is possible to win you for my wife, I will do it."

Marie quivered, and shrank from him as if startled. "You say, when he comes back — But until then you — you will not —"

"Until then we shall continue to be the same good comrades that we have been."

The girl drew in a deep breath. "Then — let us go back to work."

Hardy accepted the suggestion with a self-control that was as remarkable as it was misplaced.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ONLY WOMAN

DURING the pleasant busy days that followed, Marie showed no change in her manner towards Hardy, though she avoided the vicinity of the spring rill at the butte when in company with him. The days glided past with no break in the even tenor of their comradeship.

To all appearances Marie enjoyed the work and planning and the long hours of companionship fully as much as Hardy. Dupont, now ever bluff and genial, left them alone most of the time, and kept close to his store. But at meal-times and during the long evening discussions his eyes often twinkled cunningly under their gray thatch.

During all this time no word had been received from Washington except two notes from Vandervyn to Dupont, reporting favorable progress and enclosing sealed letters to Marie. She told nothing of what these contained, even to her father.

Hardy's first — and last — message in regard to the new treaty was an official notification that it had been duly approved and signed, after fifteen million dollars had been decided upon as

the compensation to the tribe for the mineral lands. The payment of this indemnity could not be made until Congress had appropriated the amount; but special commissioners had been named to proceed to the Reservation and arrange for the immediate opening of the mineral lands to entry. This was to be followed by the allotment of the remaining lands to the members of the tribe.

Hardy had no fault to find with these arrangements. He was, however, surprised when he saw that the time set for the departure of the commissioners had already passed. The document had been misdirected, had been returned to Washington, and then seemingly had been pigeon-holed for several days by some careless clerk before being re-mailed to him. If he had not established a more frequent mail-service, in place of the customary weekly trip to town by one of the police, the commissioners might have arrived before he received the notice.

He was still more surprised when, the following day, he and Marie rode down Sioux Creek to where it flowed into Wolf River. The moment the view down the coulée opened before them, they perceived several tents pitched in the bottom, at the foot of the butte. The strange sight overcame Marie's reluctance to approach the spring rill, and at her suggestion they started for the butte at a smart pace.

They found twenty or twenty-five rough-look-

ing men encamped along the spring rill in light dog-tents. A few were cowboys, but the greater number had the appearance and outfits of prospecting miners. They stared at Marie with the respectful admiration of typical Westerners for an "honest" woman, and readily answered Hardy's civil questions.

Notice of the prospective opening of the mineral lands of the Reservation had been published in a few very obscure weekly papers. These men had stumbled upon the unostentatiously printed proclamation, and though its phrasing was ambiguous and confusing, they had drifted to the Reservation on the chance of a "lucky gamble." One of the men gave Hardy a blurred sheet of a little "boiler-plate" country journal, and pointed out the Government notice. It was printed in the midst of several uninteresting legal notices. The old fellow winked knowingly, and remarked that, as long as *he* was in on the game, he didn't care how quiet it was played.

"What could that man have meant about being in on a quiet game?" Marie asked Hardy, as they rode down the coulée to take the road back to the Agency.

"I believe I understand, and I do not altogether like it," replied Hardy. "The fellow probably is right in thinking that undue influence is being exerted to give as little publicity as possible to the opening of the mineral lands to entry."

"Do you really think so? Of course it is not right — Yet where is the harm? These men have been enterprising enough to seize the opportunity, and they deserve the chances of good fortune."

"The transaction has rather too much the appearance of a prearranged scheme," replied Hardy. His thoughtful face darkened with the shadow of anxiety. "If I could be sure that it would bring only good fortune to you!"

The profound tenderness and concern in his voice seemed to startle Marie. She leaned forward, and put her pony into a gallop.

The day before, immediately upon receipt of the official statement from Washington, Hardy had sent a messenger to notify Ti-owa-konza. Two days later leading men of the tribe began to flock in from the mountains to meet the commissioners. The head chief came with all his large family, including Oinna. She was quite well, and looked picturesquely charming in a new dress of soft-tanned deerskin.

Marie insisted that the girl should come to stay with her until the return of Redbear. Ti-owa-konza was reluctant to part with his favorite grandchild, and Oinna appeared shyly afraid to accept the invitation. Marie overcame their objections with sheer force of will, and immediately fitted out the girl with good dresses from her own wardrobe. When Hardy spoke of her generosity, she smiled and shrugged.

"It is little enough to do for any one, Captain. I was tired of those old gowns. Anyway, as a quarterbreed, I owe it to my own self-respect to keep a halfbreed girl from going around like a full-blood woman."

"Her brother will be greatly pleased."

"I had no thought of him. He is rather a worthless fellow. It is strange to me how proud Oinna is of him. She says nothing, but one can see that she is in a fever of joyous excitement over the prospect of his return."

Hardy frowned, parted his lips to speak, and thought better of it.

"You were going to say — ?" observed Marie.

"Something that must be left unsaid, if you will pardon me," he replied, and he shifted the conversation to the question of accommodations for the commissioners.

The arrival of the commissioners early in the afternoon of the following day would have taken the Agency by surprise if Hardy had not posted a lookout on the signal mountain. The pre-arranged smoke-sign gave warning of the approach of the party while it was yet many miles away over the plains. Even at that, Hardy and Marie and Dupont were not quite ready to greet the visitors when they came into view down the valley. The explanation of their quick trip from the railroad at once became evident. Commissioners, Indian delegates, and all were stowed in two large touring-cars.

Vandervyn was driving the foremost car. He brought it up the slope of the Agency terrace with a rush, and spun it around in a curve that ended before the porch of the Dupont house. The second car rolled straight on across the terrace to the tepee of Ti-owa-konza.

Hardy, who was about to start across to the office, paused in the porch to welcome the commissioners. Dupont hurried out of the rear doorway of his store. Marie, after a slight bow in acknowledgment of Vandervyn's respectful salute, quietly drew back into her parlor.

In the front seat beside Vandervyn was a big, red-faced man, whose bleared eyes immediately began to scrutinize Hardy, and as quickly turned away when they met his clear gaze. The five men in the *tonneau* were of various types, from fat to thin and from tall to short, but all had the look of a certain kind of politician, and all met Hardy's cordial greeting with a cold formality that would have chilled even a place-hunter.

Put upon his dignity by this unexpected rebuff, the captain drew back into the porch. Dupont received a more pleasant response to his bluff welcome. He jerked open the door of the *tonneau*, and offered his hand to each of the commissioners in turn as they stepped stiffly out into the porch.

"My friend Jake Dupont, gentlemen," said Vandervyn.

Every member of the party at once smiled upon

the trader, and shook hands with him. Most cordial of all was the big man who had sat in the front seat.

Marie now stepped out to greet the visitors, and was formally introduced by Vandervyn. In the presence of the commissioners his manner towards her betrayed only a polite degree of admiration, though her beauty had never before appeared more enravishing. With a gracious composure that would have done credit to the most exclusive of drawing-rooms, she welcomed the visitors, and invited them to luncheon.

The most portly member of the commission promptly accepted the invitation on behalf of himself and his companions, and the party followed their hostess into her parlor. Vandervyn lingered a moment to favor Hardy with a smile of ironical condolence.

"Chesty lot, these lame ducks!" he said. "But they stand in with the big fellows. They had the cars shipped out from Chicago to accommodate them. Better snuggle up on their warm side — What, not going, surely? You must come in to lunch and show us how tactful a tactician can be."

"Thanks, no," replied Hardy. "I'll ask you kindly to excuse me to Miss Dupont. The commissioners may find me at the office at any time that suits them."

Vandervyn shrugged, and went indoors, his smile a trifle forced. He at once joined his party

in their eager acceptance of Dupont's most cordial expression of hospitality, his eight-year-old whisky. Marie had excused herself to the guests. By the time she reappeared every member of the party was aglow with good feeling. The girl at once became the target for a shower of compliments, all in doubtful taste and some decidedly too free and easy.

She looked to Vandervyn, and met only with an uneasy smile. Seeing that he would say nothing, she replied to the offenders with a wit and dignity that soon altered their bearing towards her. They were puzzled to find a garden rose in this rough wilderness, but she soon brought them to the realization that they were not at liberty to splash mud on her petals. The luncheon completed her conquest.

Vandervyn came to the table with all the uneasiness gone from his smile. He took his seat, and proceeded to extol Marie's skill as a *chef*. Oinna, bearing a tray, came in, and began to serve luncheon. Though extremely shy, she started with a deftness that showed careful training. Several moments passed before Vandervyn looked up and perceived her. The surprise was too sharp even for his assurance. He stopped short in his talk, and stared at her, disconcerted.

At sight of his frown the girl dropped her tray, now fortunately empty, and with a little, gasping cry fled from the room. She did not reappear. Marie passed off the awkward inci-

dent with a smile and a tactful explanation of Oinna's excessive shyness. The Indian boy finished the serving.

Vandervyn had delivered Hardy's messages. They had been received alike by Marie and by the commissioners without comment. After luncheon one of the commissioner, brusquely proposed that Hardy be summoned to attend upon them. Vandervyn interposed with the suave suggestion that the acting agent might leave in the safe some of the papers necessary to a full understanding of the affairs of the Agency.

At this the party lingered only for a parting nip at Dupont's liquid hospitality. Assuring Marie that they would return in time for dinner, they left under the escort of their host. With the excuse that he had mislaid his hat, Vandervyn returned to the dining-room. When he came out, he shut the door.

Marie was alone in the parlor. He went to the outer door, and made sure that every member of the party was following Dupont across to the Agency buildings. All the suppressed fire of his passion flamed in his face, as he turned and came swiftly back to the waiting girl. There could be no doubt that he expected her to meet him half-way.

She stood beside a chair, somewhat pale, but outwardly very calm. She did not advance a single step. Yet, blinded by his own ardor, he came on without heeding to look in her face

until within arm's-reach of her. Then at last he perceived her lack of response, and stopped.

"I say!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter? Is this the way you welcome me back, sweetheart?"

The term of endearment brought a quick blush into the girl's cheeks. But she replied in cold, even tones: "Are you now at liberty to address me as your *fiancée*?"

His eyes shifted before her level gaze. "Don't be foolish, Marie. You know you're the only woman. You know that engagement must stand until we are sure of the mine. There is something else, as well —"

"This is quite enough for the present," she broke in. "I promised to wait for you until you should come back — free from your cousin. You have returned, but you are not free from her. Is it honorable for you to speak to me now?"

"How can I help it?" he urged, seeking to melt her with his ardent gaze. "You are the only woman — the only one in all the world to me. There is not another half as beautiful, a tenth as charming!"

She quivered in response to the deep, golden notes of his voice, yet held herself firm with all the strength of her resolute will.

"You speak of love," she rejoined. "You say nothing of marriage."

"How can I?" he asked in an aggrieved tone. "You know that until we get the mine — But

that won't be long now. These commissioners are jumping-jacks in the hands of my uncle. They will hustle matters through for us — short order. Once I — we — get the mine, I'll be a free man, and then, sweetheart —”

But the girl drew back from his pleading arms.

“No,” she said. “If I must wait, so must you. If you mean what you say, you should be satisfied that I still feel I may have to wait.”

“You mean — what?” he stammered.

She clenched her hands convulsively. “Why did you come first? Why could I not have known him first?”

“I see,” he muttered. “It's that — that tin soldier.”

“Yes, it is — that gentleman!” she flashed back. Again the slender finger-nails cut into her palms. “Oh, why can I not do what my reason, my experience, my soul tells me! I could trust him absolutely!”

“Nice fatherly old foggy!” sneered Vandervyn. “Good thing for you — and for me — that you're far too much alive, too much of a real woman, to mistake your feeling towards him for love. *Love!* that's the word, sweetheart — youth and love and happiness! That's our share in the good things of life. You know it. Own up, now — you know it. You and I, sweetheart! Give me a kiss!”

She blushed and trembled. But she had spent all the days of his absence in that intimate com-

radeship with Hardy. At the moment when Vandervyn thought to take her into his arms, her will rallied, her eyes hardened with resolution.

"I have said that I will wait. That is enough. You also shall wait."

His eyes narrowed. "Has it never occurred to you that you may be a bit too sure of me? The mine isn't the only good thing I've as good as got in hand. The mine may pinch out after the first few hundred thousands. I'm in on another deal that stands to net me a cool million. When I get that in bank, I can have any girl I choose to go after, and lots of them without going."

"Oh, to hear you say such a thing!" reproached Marie. "If I had ten times a million, and could buy you a character like his, I would gladly pay it all—all!"

The slash of a whip in his face would have stung him far less. He stared at her a long moment, while the full meaning of the words cut through the armor of his self-esteem. Mortification, anger, furious chagrin flamed in his face. He raised his hand as if to strike her, and instead, whirled about and rushed out through the porch.

The girl sank on her knees, and pressed her hands to her lips to stifle the cry that would have called him back. When she looked up, her face was white and drawn with anguish. But she had conquered.

“He shall not—shall not know my weakness!” she whispered with fierce determination. “If only it has offended him beyond forgiveness! If only he may go away—forever! I might be able to forget him—in time!”

CHAPTER XXII

PLEASANT LITTLE SURPRISES

TOO furious to heed what he was about, Vandervyn struck off up a rugged gulley behind the Dupont house. An hour passed before he came back down the mountain-side. His shoes were scuffed and his natty suit was torn in three or four places. But he returned on the smooth, open slope, and his face showed that his rage had spent itself. With cool self-control he walked past the Dupont house, and crossed the terrace to his own quarters.

He was changing his clothes when Dupont brought him an impatient summons from the office: "Hurry up, Mr. Van. They want you. Where you been all this time?"

"Went for a stroll," drawled Vandervyn. "Happened to snag my trousers. Tell them I'll be along presently — Stop. They can wait." His voice became harsh and incisive. "I want to speak to you about something. You've been letting Marie get in thick with him."

"Who? You mean Cap?" sparred Dupont. "By Gar, you know she don't need no letting, Mr. Van. Anyway, you didn't say you wanted me to keep 'em from running together."

"You should have seen the danger. Lord, man, haven't you thought of the risk you've let her incur? I take it, she has been alone with him most of the time."

"Well, what of it?" muttered Dupont.

"What of it?" echoed Vandervyn. "Don't you know enough about army officers to realize that he would never marry—a quarterbreed?"

Dupont's crafty eyes narrowed. "I'm not so all-fired sure of that. There's lots of 'em has married even halfbreeds. I've seen 'em."

"Years ago, when the frontier was months away from civilization."

"Mebbe, and mebbe them breed girls wasn't a tenth as good lookers as Marie. What's more, they was just camp-girls. She has been to convent. She's got the makings of a lady."

Vandervyn's lip curled. "If you must have the gaff, Jake—how about yourself? Do you think an officer son-in-law would care to have you visiting him at an army post, even on the frontier? All the other officers and their families would cut him—and Marie too."

Dupont scowled. "Well, there ain't been no harm done, and you're back now."

"Quite true. But his attentions have put Marie on her high horse. I wish you to take a stand against him and back me up with her."

"You sure can count me in on that, Mr. Van," eagerly assented Dupont.

"All right. I've got him fixed. But I wanted

to make sure of your backing. If he comes to dinner tonight, I'll have a gay little surprise or two up my sleeve for him."

"I been waiting to ask you about the mine. How're we going to work the deal? Going to have a lottery, and fix it so's we'll draw first choice?"

"No. That would be a bit too raw. We've got to make a show of a real contest. It's to be run on the old-style rush plan."

"Suppose one of them there men at the butte has the best horse?"

Vandervyn thrust out his jaw. "Don't fash yourself. I'm going to have that mine. This is my idea of the way we'll fix it." He leaned over, and murmured in Dupont's ear.

The trader shook his head. "Um-m! I'm not saying that mightn't work. Just the same, though, it'd make you the only one what could do the entering. I'd be a sooner."

"The mine would be entered by me, but of course we would have the understanding that you were to get your half," replied Vandervyn. He stepped briskly to the door. "Come. I guess the bunch has had time enough to cool their heels."

Still frowning dubiously, Dupont followed him over to the office, where Hardy and the commissioners sat waiting for them, stiff and constrained.

Hardy at once addressed Vandervyn: "Be so kind as to open the safe and lay before these

commissioners every public paper in the office. They decline to show me their authority for an inspection of my accounts. Therefore I have declined to make an official presentation to them of Agency affairs. There is nothing to conceal from any inquirer. You may hand every document to these persons — in my presence."

Vandervyn nonchalantly shrugged, and went over to open the safe. One of the commissioners remarked in an officious tone: "Where is the issue clerk? He ought to be present to explain his accounts."

"That's Charlie Redbear, gentleman — the interpreter," explained Dupont. "He lit out with his sister, down creek to his house, when we was eating. Want me to send for him? You'll need him to make your official talk to the chiefs."

"You will do as well for that, Jake," interposed Vandervyn. "Besides, I believe the commissioners will wish to put off the pow-wow-ing until tomorrow. It's a tiresome trip across from the railroad. No doubt they will glance through the Agency papers, and then go over to your house to plan the opening of the mineral lands."

The big, blear-eyed man who had ridden in the front seat of the car, nodded and replied in an oily tone: "If *you* assure us the accounts are correct, Mr. Vandervyn, I think it is needless trouble at this time to make further investigation."

"Still, oughtn't we to — " One of the com-

missioners began a querulous objection. But his fellows were rising to leave the office, and he bent to the will of the majority.

Hardy bowed them out with punctilious courtesy. When they had gone, he sat down, and began writing the conclusion of his report on the feasibility of irrigating the strip of arable land between Wolf River and the mountains. He was still working when Marie's Indian boy brought word that she wished him to come to dinner without fail. He hesitated for several moments, but at last sent back the reply that he would be present.

Having in mind the cold and almost insulting manner of the visitors, he cut his arrival as close as possible. This proved to be a tactful move. Though the newcomers were all mellow with whisky, a chilling silence followed the entrance of the acting agent. Even Dupont turned his thick shoulder, and poured himself another drink without a word of greeting.

Only Vandervyn raised his empty glass to the last guest, and called ironically: "Just in time, Captain. Here's to your quick progress along the course of your career."

Hardy did not reply. He was bowing to Marie, who had that moment appeared in the dining-room doorway.

"Dinner is served, gentlemen," she said, and she bowed in her most *grande dame* manner. "Captain Hardy, you may take me in."

Vandervyn sprang up, angry-eyed. Marie did not seem to perceive him. She stepped in beside Hardy, and waited with perfect composure while the other guests passed out after her father. Vandervyn's face was far from pleasant as he followed the others. The girl did not look at him. Hardy escorted her to the head of the table, and she gave him the seat of honor. The chairman of the commission was graciously assigned to the seat on her left.

Hardy was deeply gratified, but he failed to realize the full meaning of his preferment as the most distinguished gentleman present. Vandervyn alone was fully aware of the motives that had prompted Marie to honor his rival. He bent over his plate, his lip between his teeth. For a time he could neither eat nor talk. Then he rallied, and, with a sudden outpouring of cynical wit, took the lead in the conversation. He proved that, when in the mood, he could be a brilliant entertainer. Even Hardy and Marie soon were interested and smiling.

He continued to entertain every one at table throughout the meal. Only near the end, he seemed to flag in his efforts. This brought out bantering sallies from all except Hardy. For a while the silenced entertainer sat staring into the bubbling amber of his champagne, his lips curved in an odd smile. At last a merry quip from Marie stirred him to action. He rose and bowed to her.

"Lady—and gentlemen," he smilingly remarked, "you mock me. Yet I shall prove to you that my quiver is not yet empty. I still have a shot or two in the locker. They are my best, and therefore I have kept them until the last. They consist of two very pleasant little announcements. It is my fond expectation that you will relish them quite as much as you have relished this delicious little dinner."

He looked at Marie, smiled, and continued:

"My first announcement relates to our martial fellow-guest, the gallant and distinguished Captain Floyd Hardy. He may have anticipated the auspicious news that I am about to deliver, when he heard me, at the beginning of the evening, wish him quick progress on the course of his career. The privilege and pleasure are mine to inform the distinguished officer that the War Department has been pleased to relieve him of this irksome detail and grant him permission immediately to join his regiment, which is at Vancouver Barracks, Washington, under orders to sail for Alaska."

All eyes turned upon Hardy. Some glinted with malice; others were cold. Marie's alone were sympathetic. Hardy glanced around the table with an imperturbed look, and bowed to Vandervyn.

"Pray accept my acknowledgment of the kindness with which you make the announcement," he said, and he turned to smile gravely into

Marie's troubled face. "I could have asked for time to carry out our irrigation plans. But, doubtless, the Bureau will find some one more competent than myself."

"Will you not remonstrate against this unjust order?" she exclaimed.

"You forget that I am a soldier," he replied. "Army life is a life of service. You will now understand why most army women are army girls before they are army wives."

"Ah—but if a woman loves!" murmured Marie, and her gaze sank with the drooping of her silken lids. "Alaska must be a magnificent land to visit."

Vandervyn was bending to seat himself. He straightened as if struck. The suddenness of the movement drew all eyes back to him. His wine-flushed face had gone white. He met the wondering look of the man opposite, and forced a smile.

"I have still another announcement to make," he said, "one that you will all admit to be still more pleasant than the delightful news of our gallant friend's summons to wider fields of service. Gentlemen—and lady—permit me to remind you that all the world loves a lover. This being true, it follows that all the world must doubly love a pair of lovers. It is my privilege and delight to be able to name myself as one of the pair, and also to announce that, as I am not at present free to engage myself, the other

member of the pair, our charming hostess, has graciously given her promise to wait for me."

He caught up his champagne glass, which the Indian boy had just refilled.

"Gentlemen, here's to the loveliest girl in the world, the lady who has given me her true promise!"

The commissioners rose — Dupont rose. Hardy sat as if stunned, his eyes fixed upon Marie's face in a strained, half-incredulous stare. She was very pale. She seemed to shrink. Yet she made no attempt to deny Vandervyn's statements. Hardy stood up with the other men, and, for the first time that evening, he emptied his champagne glass.

"Youth to youth!" he murmured. Meeting Vandervyn's exultant smile, he drew in a deep breath, and his voice rang clear and steady: "You are to be congratulated, sir. I wish you the great good fortune that you may in all things prove worthy of the lady's trust."

Vandervyn's flushed face crimsoned, but whether with shame or anger could not be told. Marie had risen, and her tactfulness diverted attention from the rivals.

"The coffee and cigars will be served in the parlor," she announced.

Vandervyn somewhat hastily led the way to the other room. Hardy, being the farthest away, followed behind the others. When he came to the door, he coolly closed and bolted it.

"Captain!" breathlessly exclaimed Marie.
 "What will they think?"

"Most of them are beyond thinking, and they have the whisky bottle," he replied. He faced about, and came back to her.

She shrank before the look in his eyes.

"You — you have no right!" she murmured.
 "I will go —"

"Not until you hear me. There may be no other opportunity for me to see you alone before I go away," he said. "I do not wish to reproach you. You may realize that your failure to tell me of this promise to him led me to believe I had a fighting chance."

"You — do not — let me go to explain," she faltered.

"What is there to explain?" he rejoined.
 "You knew that I trusted your sincerity utterly, and you were willing to amuse yourself with me while he was away."

"I — You have no right," she sought to defend herself. "I never led you to believe —"

"You told me nothing of that promise to him. I thought you — what you knew I thought you; and all these weeks, every day — How can a woman look so beautiful — seem so true and loving in every word and act — and toy with the deepest feelings of a man as you have amused yourself with mine? No, do not attempt to deny the facts, please. It will only add to the bitterness. I am trying to keep from saying

harsher things. I cannot hide the fact that you have struck me a severe blow. It would be easier if you had not insisted upon my coming here to-night to be made the butt of his mockery."

Marie threw up her head, her eyes blazing with indignant scorn.

"You can believe that of me? I thought you a gentleman!" Her voice hardened. "You have been served as you deserve. And now I am glad — glad!"

He turned about, and went out through the parlor. The other men were clinking glasses in jolly good-fellowship. Dupont waveringly offered him the whisky bottle. He thrust it back, and left the house.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN SELF-DEFENSE

RATHER early the next morning the big, red-faced, blear-eyed man came alone to the office. He found Hardy making out a final report as acting agent.

"Getting ready to turn over?" he asked.

"I am prepared to do so the moment the new agent arrives and has checked the lists of Agency property," was Hardy's curt reply.

"All right. I'll O. K. your report. Don't need to check the lists of an officer and gentleman," the man purred in his oiliest tone. He handed over a packet. "Here are the papers relieving you, and my appointment. I'm the new agent. I held them back to give young Vandervyn the chance to spring his pleasant little surprises on you."

"Very considerate," said Hardy. He opened and read the official documents with care, pocketed his own, and handed the other back to the new agent. "Very good. Now if you will examine the accounts of the chief clerk and the issue clerk. I have brought them down to date, together with my report."

The new agent glanced at the papers, and took up a pen. "You've certified their correctness. That's enough for me. I'll give you my O. K. of the turn-over."

"You would oblige me by checking the property in the warehouse."

"Waste of time, Captain. You'll want to be starting for the railroad. We made a night of it. Commissioners' heads are sore this morning. They want to get to work, and this is the best place. I can loan you my touring-car to take you over to the railroad."

"Thank you. I prefer to ride my mare," said Hardy. "I shall ask you, however, to send one of the police with my trunk in Dupont's buckboard."

"I'll send it in the motor. There's a lot more of our own baggage to be brought out from the railroad," insisted the new agent.

He receipted Hardy's papers, and went to hunt up the chauffeur of the second car. Hardy took his private papers and the reports that he wished to mail, and went over to his quarters to pack his baggage. He was no more than ready when the car came around to the cabin.

As the big machine chugged off down the valley, the commissioners passed on their way to the office. Dupont was with them, but Vandervyn was absent. Hardy gave them a civil word of greeting, and started down the slope for his mare. At this Dupont called to a policeman to fetch the

mare, and turned back to offer Hardy his big hand.

"Hope you ain't going off with no hard feelings, Cap," he said.

Hardy gravely shook hands with him.

"None, this morning," he assured. "A man cannot afford to cherish enmity. I shall ask you to go with me to the tepee of the head chief."

Dupont hesitated, and ended by complying with the request. They found old Ti-owa-konza seated in his tepee, waiting for the white chiefs to call a council. When, with Dupont's aid, Hardy explained that he must go away, the noble old chief's stolidity fell from him like a mask, and he rose to cry out in impassioned speech against the departure of the tribe's true friend. Hardy could only express his deep regret, and repeat that he had to obey the orders of his own head chief. When he had explained the report on irrigation that he was mailing to the Indian Bureau, he exchanged trifling gifts of friendship with the chief, and tore himself away.

The policeman was waiting with the mare. Hardy gave him a coin, and swung into the saddle.

"One last word, Dupont," he said. "Kindly tell your daughter what I said about not cherishing enmity."

"How about Mr. Van?" questioned Dupont.

"You need say nothing to him from me. But —" Hardy bent over in the saddle to bring

his stern face near the trader's — "I advise you to watch that young man."

Before Dupont could speak, Hardy straightened in the saddle, and the mare started off on her long-strided trot. Dupont stood for some time staring after the rhythmically rising and falling figure of the officer. When he started for his store, before which a crowd of Indians were waiting, his shrewd eyes were narrow with calculation, and his stubby forefinger was rubbing the grizzled hair under the brim of his hat.

Hardy permitted the mare to choose her own pace down the valley. She was in far too perfect condition to be hurt by a rapid start, and she could come down to a walk during the heat of midday. Yet he was in no hurry. The west-bound express did not pass through the little shack town until late at night.

As he neared the foot of the valley, he saw Redbear and Oinna riding up the creek from the road crossing. The girl drooped in her saddle as if ill. Her brother was swaying in a manner that threatened to lurch him out of his seat at any moment. Hardy left the road, and cut across to intercept them.

A nearer view confirmed his suspicions. Redbear was intoxicated, and he was abusing his sister in the foulest of language. When Hardy approached, the girl averted her shame-reddened face, and drooped still lower over her pony's withers. Redbear leered insolently at the in-

truder, and burst into a drunken laugh. Though his body was reeling, he had almost perfect control of his tongue —

“Look at him, Weena; the —” Here followed a number of obscene epithets. “That man of yours lost no time. The tin soldier is on the run. Told you we had fixed him.”

“You drunken dog!” said Hardy. “Keep quiet and go home.”

“Who’s going to make me?” challenged the halfbreed, his bloodshot eyes flaring with vicious anger. “I don’t take any more orders from you — there’s a new agent — Been celebrating at the butte camp — off the Reservation — whisky cheap — New agent — I can say what I think of you now.”

He cursed virulently. “You’d make out I tried to steal cattle, would you? You’d try to put the killing of Nogen on me — try to make out it was me shot him, and tried to shoot you those two times! But Van fixed you. He promised to keep you from putting me in jail. That’s why I let him have Weena when we went into the mountains.”

“You cur!” cried Hardy. “So you permitted him to do that? You did not defend your sister from him!”

Oinna threw up her head with the courage of outraged innocence.

“Why should he stop him from taking me?” she shrilled. “I am only a breed girl, but my

man loves me, me only! I had a right to be his wife if I wanted to."

"His wife?" incredulously exclaimed Hardy. "A man of his stamp never could have married you."

"He did! he did!" insisted Oinna. "I thought you too kind to think I would be a bad girl. He married me by tribal custom and the common-law way of white people."

Hardy's sharp gaze softened with pity. "You poor young innocent! Tribal custom is not binding on a white man."

"But common-law marriage!" triumphantly rejoined the girl in the faith of her unquestioning love. "He said white people often get married that way."

Hardy burst out between pity and indignation: "The scoundrel!—You poor child! Common-law marriage is only half-marriage at best. To make it even that much of a tie, it is necessary that a man and woman should live together as husband and wife *openly*. He kept this matter secret; he persuaded you and your brother to tell no one—the scoundrel!"

Stricken with grief and shame, Oinna uttered a moan, and crouched down over her pony's withers, with her face in her hands. But the drink-crazed brain of Redbear comprehended only that Hardy was berating his sister's husband. He made an effort to straighten in the saddle, and his right hand fumbled eagerly for the hilt

of his revolver. Hardy swerved his mare alongside, and reached out to grasp the weapon as it left the holster.

Instinctively Redbear threw himself over away from Hardy. The movement was so ill judged that it caused him to lose his unsteady balance. He slumped from the saddle like a sack of grain. The startled pony leaped forward, and galloped away up the creek bank. Oinna slipped down to run to her brother. But Hardy was quicker. He threw himself on the half-dazed drunkard, and so grasped the revolver that the hammer could not fall. A skilful wrench loosened the stubborn clutch of the other's fingers. Disarmed and perhaps partly sobered by the shock, all the fight left Redbear. He stretched out on the dusty sod.

"Oh, he is hurt!" gasped Oinna.

Hardy rolled the drunkard away from her, and spoke sternly: "He is not hurt. Redbear, stand up!"

The halfbreed did not move. Hardy frowned, and repeated the command in a tone that even an intoxicated man could understand. Redbear gathered himself together and, aided by Oinna, staggered to his feet. Hardy looked about. Oinna's pony was cantering away after its companion. Hardy led his mare around beside Redbear, and he and Oinna, between them, managed to lift the almost helpless man into the saddle. While they were going the half-mile to the cabin, Hardy led the mare, and Oinna walked beside

her brother to steady him in his seat. Neither saw the rider who rode up out of the creek bed beyond the cabin and wheeled from view behind the end wall.

When they reached the house, Hardy helped Redbear dismount before the door, and handed him his unloaded revolver. He then lifted his hat to Oinna with utmost respectfulness.

"Miss Redbear," he said, "you have been wronged in a most despicable manner. That does not make you any less pure and modest in the eyes of all right-thinking people. No one can justly blame you for what has occurred. But you must see that it will be wrong for you to live with him after this."

"I — I know," faltered Oinna, her eyes on the ground. "You are good to say I am not a — a bad girl. I will try not to be bad — only my heart — maybe it won't let me."

"He has lied to you," insisted Hardy. "You must keep away from him. Go back into the mountains with your grandfather. I believe the rascal will soon leave the Reservation, and then you will be free from him."

"Thanks for the prophecy, Captain," came a jeer from the end of the cabin.

They stared about, and saw Vandervyn standing at the corner, his face set in a cynical smile.

"So you've quit soldiering and taken to preaching," he sneered.

"O-o-oh!" sighed Oinna, and she crept towards the mocker, her hands imploringly outstretched, her soft eyes brimming over with tears of pitiful entreaty. "Tell him—tell him it isn't true! Tell him our marriage is a real marriage!"

"What a fuss over a little thing like that!" he rallied. "You wanted me, and you've had me longer than some other girls. That ought to satisfy you."

The girl cringed back, and sank down, in silent anguish, to hide her face.

"For shame, sir!" cried Hardy. "Have you no shred of decency?"

Vandervyn laughed. Redbear started staggering towards him, the empty revolver concealed behind his back with drunken cunning.

"You think it's damn funny," he muttered, "damn funny joke! You own up that marriage with her wasn't real like you said it was."

"What if it wasn't?" bantered Vandervyn. "It was good enough for a halfbreed squaw." He smiled at Hardy. "Yes, good enough for any halfbreed or — quarterbreed. I'll have Marie next."

Hardy tensed, yet instantly checked the wrath that would have impelled him to hurl himself at the throat of the mocker. Redbear lacked such iron self-mastery, and liquor had numbed his sense of subserviency to Vandervyn. At Marie's name his fury burst out.

"You liar! you thief!" he yelled. "She's mine! You promised! I'll show you, you—" Cursing wildly, he flourished his revolver, and brought it down in a wavering attempt to take aim.

"Stop! stop!" Hardy called to Vandervyn. "It's not loaded! Stop!"

But Vandervyn had already whipped out his revolver, and was pressing the trigger. From the muzzle leaped a sheet of flame. Redbear flung up his arms, and pitched backwards. Swiftly Vandervyn re-cocked his revolver, and aimed it at Hardy.

"Put up your hands! Keep them away from your coat!" he shouted in fierce menace.

Hardy did not put up his hands. He stepped forward, and bent down on one knee to feel the heart of the halfbreed. Shrieking with horror, Oinna came tottering back to them. She fell fainting across the body of her brother. Hardy looked up, grim and quiet.

"I hope you are satisfied," he said. "You have killed him."

Vandervyn's lips twitched, and one corner drew up, so that the canine tooth appeared. He kept his revolver pointed at Hardy.

"I shot in self-defense," he snarled. "Don't you make a move. He had his gun on me —"

"It was empty. I called to you."

"You didn't—not till I had fired. How

could I tell? He was aiming at me. I shot him down to save my life. I'll shoot you, too, if you try to draw."

"Get out of here!" ordered Hardy, heedless of the threat. "You've caused trouble enough. Send the new agent. You can tell him that I admit you seem to have been justified. I presume you fired before you heard me."

Vandervyn's menacing attitude relaxed. He half lowered his revolver, but kept a wary watch on Hardy as he backed away.

"Yes; even you can't say anything else," he blustered. "It was justifiable self-defense. But I don't need your evidence. The agent will take my word for it."

He slipped around the corner of the cabin, and ran to jump on his pony and gallop away.

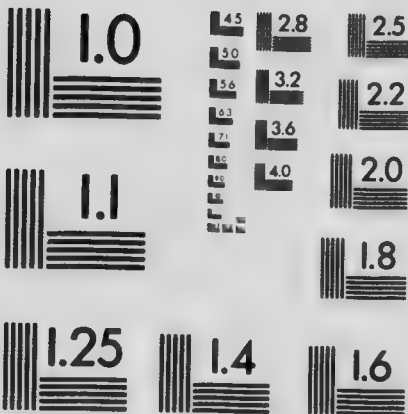
Hardy had sprung up. But it was only to hasten into the house for water. The door had been left on the latch in hospitable Western fashion. He came out with a half-filled bucket, drew Oinna over on her back, and dashed water into her face. After some time she moaned. He fanned her wet cheeks with his hat. She opened her eyes, saw him, and, reddening with shame, turned her face aside. It happened to be towards her brother.

For a moment Hardy thought that she had again fainted. Then he saw that she was staring in speechless horror at the great blotch of crimson on the breast of her brother. Suddenly she



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drew herself up on her elbow to bend over the gray face.

"He — is not — dead!" she gasped.

Redbear's lips were moving. Hardy knelt to lift him up to a half-sitting position. He knew by grim experience that with such a wound there was no hope, but he also knew that it would ease the agony to raise the injured man. Oinna dampened her brother's forehead. He muttered a curse.

"Not that, boy," warned Hardy. "You have only a few minutes."

Redbear seemingly did not hear him. He repeated the curse: "The — ! I'd 'a' got him — way I got Nogen — if you hadn't — unloaded — my gun."

"You shot Nogen?" queried Hardy. "Speak out! You say you shot Nogen?"

"He — wanted her — Marie — same way as Van — same way as — Van said you — wanted her. We — I — tried to get you — twice — because he, Van, told me you wanted Marie — that way. The liar — the *Ah-r-rh!*"

From between the lips that had parted to utter the curse there gushed a scarlet stream.

Hardy laid the body on the ground, and drew the distracted girl away by main force.

"Come into the house," he ordered. "You must not look at him."

She offered only passive resistance. When he had put her in a chair, she sat motionless, as if dazed, her dry eyes fixed on vacancy.

"This won't do," he said. "You must go to your grandfather. I cannot take you with me, and besides —"

He checked himself, caught up a blanket, and went outdoors. When presently he returned, she had not moved. He fastened her scant wardrobe and few trinkets in a blanket roll, and led her out around the house, carefully keeping himself between her and the blanket-covered form on the ground near the door. He had brought her own and her brother's pony to the back of the house. He lashed the bundle on the dead man's saddle, lifted the girl upon her pony, and mounted his mare.

Half-way to the Agency they met Ti-owa-konza coming down with several members of his family to visit his halfbreed grandchildren. Urged by Hardy, the girl broke her distraught silence to tell the old chief what had happened. Before she had finished she was weeping in the arms of her grandfather.

Having done his best, Hardy turned the mare about, and rode away on his interrupted journey to the railroad.

Notwithstanding the delay, he again permitted the mare to choose her own pace. Though she went at a steady trot, a messenger in the remaining automobile easily could have overtaken him at any time before dark. But no messenger was sent.

Mid-afternoon Hardy met the car that had

taken his baggage to town. It was piled high with the baggage of the new agent and the commissioners. The chauffeur, with the indifference of a city man, whirled past him without so much as slackening speed.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE REGISTRATION

AT noon the following day the commissioners came out to the butte, and announced the conditions of the land opening. All entrymen were to start from the coulée at a given signal, to be made at ten o'clock in the morning of the second day following. Any person who started before the signal would be disqualified.

A tent was set up for the commissioners in the coulée bottom, on the Reservation side of the dwindled stream, and the chairman and secretary proceeded to take the signatures, thumb prints, and descriptions of the waiting colony of prospectors and cowboys.

Since Hardy and Marie had first come upon the camp, the number of men had twice doubled. Yet, owing to the obscure manner in which the proposed opening had been advertised, there were absurdly few of them, all told, compared to the multitudes at other Governmental land openings. Perhaps with a view towards covering this discrepancy, the commissioners had ordered full descriptions of every contestant, and so managed to cover many sheets of paper and to consume much time.

The recording was well under way when Vandervyn and Dupont came down to the camp, the trader on horseback and his companion riding with the chauffeur of the second touring-car. Neither made any attempt to push into the line of entrymen. But while Vandervyn chatted with one of the commissioners, Dupont proceeded to read the posted notice of the conditions of the contest. When he reached the end, he frowned, and remarked to Vandervyn that he wished to show him something over at the butte. The young man looked bored, yet borrowed a pony, and rode across with him to the deserted camp.

"What is it?" he asked. "Have you found a mare's nest that is hatching out a horse good enough to outrun triplets?"

Dupont shook his head. "Don't you let nobody hear that joke round here, Mr. Van. Them there prospectors and punchers are wise. They ain't got no extra-good horses, but they all lug guns, and they ain't the kind to stand for no funny business."

"They'll have to stand for it, if they don't *understand* it," punned Vandervyn. "In this game three of a kind beat all the jacks in the pack."

"You best keep your head shut, just the same. Them punchers 'll ride the hardest, and they're mighty sharp to see the diff'rence between horses."

"I told you, I shall rush them off their feet,

They'll think me a fool, and drop behind, to overhaul me later. Now, if that's all you have to tell me — "

He wheeled his borrowed pony, to ride back.

"Hold on!" replied Dupont, frowning uneasily. "I want to talk over fixing up about the way we share the mine."

Vandervyn lifted his eyebrows. "Aren't you satisfied? Now that Redbear is — out of the way, there will be none to question our sharing of the mine between us."

"It's between us, all right," sullenly replied Dupont. "Tain't in writing, though. According to them conditions, if I don't register today, I don't git no right to enter no claim. What's to keep you from turning round and telling me to whistle for my half, soon's you git title to the mine? "

"Why, Jake!" exclaimed Vandervyn in an aggrieved tone. "How can you think I could throw you down that way? Even if we weren't friends, you know I want Marie."

Dupont's eyes narrowed, and his jaw set obstinately. "That's all right; but them that want to remain friends want to remember that business is business."

Vandervyn frowned, considered the matter a few moments, smiled, and drew a folded paper from an inner pocket.

"Very well. I expected to wait until I reached the mine. But since you insist, here it is, — my

deed to you of a full half-interest. You've been hinting and looking so confounded uneasy ever since the — accident to Redbear, that I thought I'd be ready for you."

Mumbling an apology, Dupont hastily unfolded the deed. He first made certain that it was duly signed, sealed, and acknowledged. He then skimmed through it from the beginning, and grasped the fact that it purported to convey to him a full half-interest in the mine. He had started to read it over more carefully when an oath from Vandervyn caused him to look up.

The younger man pointed along the coulée bank to where the road topped the spur ridge of the butte.

"The devil!" he exclaimed. "What brings him back here?"

"Cap! It sure is Cap!" muttered Dupont. "*Nom d'un chien!* You don't think he's got onto the game, do you?"

"Wouldn't do him any good if he had," snapped Vandervyn. "Any possible move that he could make in Washington would be blocked before it could pass through our lines."

"Then why d'you think he's —"

"To enter the contest!" divined Vandervyn. "The hypocrite! Agreed not to tell about the mine; now he comes back to try to beat us to it! I'll teach him not to play the double-cross on me! There's time enough to wire Washington

and have him put under arrest for disobeying orders."

"Hold on!" cautioned Dupont. "We don't want to give him no handle to stir up a fuss till we've got the mine cinched. What if he does try his luck? We've got a dead open and shut on the proposition. If it was a straight-away plains run, we might have to look out for that mare. She sure is some horse. But in the mountains there ain't no horse nor mare neither can break up your pinto combine."

Vandervyn's face cleared. "You ought to know. I'll chance it if —"

"Ain't no chance to it," put in Dupont. "It's a dead cinch."

"He'll think he's going to do me," exulted Vandervyn. "Let him register! I wouldn't miss it for a little bit!"

"Mebbe he's come back for something else," suggested Dupont.

"For the mine first; then Marie," rejoined Vandervyn. "I don't want her to see him or to know he has come back. You have your deed. Suppose you start at once."

"If she's willing. I'll see," qualified Dupont. "Look out you don't slip up. I'll tend to my end. So long — good luck!"

He rode off down the butte side of the coulée.

Vandervyn cantered straight across, and met Hardy a few yards below the tent of the commissioners.

"Good day, Captain," he spoke in civil greeting. "I am surprised to see you back here. Have your orders been countermanded?"

"No," replied Hardy with equal civility. "I have resigned."

Vandervyn could not conceal his blank astonishment. "Not — not resigned from the army?"

"Yes. I telegraphed the War Department, received an answer, and mailed my resignation and application for leave of absence to my commanding officer at Vancouver Barracks. As an officer it was not proper for me to enter the contest."

"Ah!" Vandervyn's smile gave place to a look of pained surprise. "So you intend to enter the contest. But do you think that quite honorable, Captain, in the circumstances?"

"I do not care to discuss questions of honor with you, Mr. Vandervyn," replied Hardy with utmost coolness.

"That I can well understand," countered Vandervyn. "Knowing that we can make no protest, you intend personally to take advantage of the information that you pledged yourself to keep secret."

Hardy dismounted without replying, and placed himself at the end of the line of registering entrymen.

The commissioners were making slow but steady progress. One after another, the members of the long line were being passed through

the open-ended tent. Those that were already registered stood about, watchfully eying the signing up of the applicants who followed them. There was still two hours' work ahead of the leisurely writing secretary. Vandervyn strolled around to the chauffeur of the second car, and wrote a cipher telegram. After he had returned and taken a seat in the tent with the commissioners, the chauffeur jumped into the car, and sent it whirring down the coulée. Hardy saw it start, and watched it attentively. When it turned across and drove up the steep grade of the far bank, on the road to town, his look of quiet resolution took on a shade of grimness.

The sun was far down in the sky when he came before the secretary's table, at the end of the line. Vandervyn rose from his easy seat to take a position behind him. The secretary hesitated, and looked inquiringly at Vandervyn. He met with a nod to proceed.

"You wish to register?" came the curt question of the chairman.

"Yes," replied Hardy with equal curtness.

"Is an army officer entitled to enter the contest?" questioned the smallest commissioner.

"You need not debate the matter," said Hardy.

"I have resigned my commission."

Again Vandervyn nodded, and there were no farther objections raised. Hardy and he signed the register, and made their thumb prints, and were duly described in writing by the secretary.

Hardy at once mounted his mare, and rode away up the coulée. He did not return until Vandervyn and the commissioners had left for the Agency.

That evening he drew up the legal notices required in the posting of a mining-claim, and paid three or four of the older prospectors to check them for errors. To all who inquired, he described the trail by which he had gone into the mountains, and frankly stated that he knew of none other that led to the nearest of the four prominent peaks which had been named as the corners of the mineral-land boundary.

The rest of the evening and most of the following day he spent in grooming his mare. He gave her no grass and little water, but a good allowance of oats. Both morning and afternoon he took her out for short rides up the coulée, and each time repeatedly climbed and descended the bank. He did not cross over to the Reservation side, much less go to the Agency.

The day set for the opening dawned still and clear, with the promise of burning heat by noon.

After breakfast the more uneasy spirits began wandering about the camp or fidgeting with their packs. Nearly all the older and more experienced men gave their ponies a feed of oats, and stretched out to lounge in the shade of their tents.

Two hours before the time set for the start,

Vandervyn appeared, and crossed over to the camp. He was riding his pinto and leading a pack pony. When the old prospectors saw his heavy pick and shovel and large poorly lashed pack of food and bedding, they cracked many dry jokes on the grand chances of the tenderfoot. Their own picks and shovels were as light as such tools could be made without impairing their efficiency, and their packs were as lean as Vandervyn's pack was swollen.

Hardy alone divined the deceptive mockery of his rival's cumbersome display. But he was bound by his word and could say nothing. It was he, and not Vandervyn, who was looked upon with suspicion by the crowd. Soon there was a gathering of a mob-like group, that rumbled awhile, and ended by presenting itself before Hardy as a committee of inquiry.

"You been agent at this here Reservation," explained their spokesman. "We want to know if you've got a frame-up to have some feller meet you with your pack animals over in the mountains."

"No," replied Hardy. "There are four days' rations in my saddlebags. A poncho is all one needs in sleeping before a fire this time of year."

"You ain't got no tools," criticized a man who had been drinking.

"The same is true of several among you," Hardy rejoined.

One of the cowboys who was included in this

remark called back resonantly: "You've been into the mountains. I bet you a blue chip you've got a good prospect spotted, ready for branding."

"I am not making any bets," said Hardy. "You have heard all I know about the trail. Mr. Vandervyn has made the trip several times. He was with me during the one trip I made. I have no objection to your questioning him about it."

There was some muttering over this. But Hardy's manner was so cool and quiet that the incipient mob left him, and straggled over to where Vandervyn had hired an expert to throw the diamond hitch on his ridiculous pack. Hardy turned his back on them, and set to grooming the satiny coat of his mare. His unconcern was well founded. Whatever means Vandervyn used, they were sufficient to satisfy the crowd. The muttering soon ceased, and the men dispersed.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RACE

THE commissioners came down from the Agency barely in time to make their identification of the contestants. Each man was required to pass through the tent in the order of his registry, and then to cross back to the far side of the stream and line up with the others whose names had been checked.

Last of all, Hardy and Vandervyn identified themselves, and hurried over to the end of the waiting line. There was a scant five minutes remaining. The new agent and one of the commissioners paced up the Reservation side of the stream, opposite the line, in mock-serious imitation of officers on parade.

A few of the contestants laughed. The greater number sat stolidly on their ewe-necked ponies, holding the lead straps of their pack animals with seeming laxity. Hardy glanced at Vandervyn. He himself was as cool, if not as stolid, as the older prospectors.

Vandervyn was a-quiver with eager excitement, and made no attempt to conceal the fact. He smiled, and waved his hand to the commis-

sioners, and looked about with sparkling eyes. There was no anxiety or envy or malice in his look. Never had he appeared handsomer or more boyish.

The other commissioners had climbed into the touring-car. One of them held up his watch. The agent and his companion marched back to them. There was an exchange of jests. The agent called out betting odds, as if he were a bookmaker at a horse-race. The commissioners were laughing at his efforts when the chairman announced that his watch pointed to ten o'clock. The secretary carelessly waved a small flag in warning. Another commissioner arose, thrust a small pistol above his head with a melodramatic flourish, and fired.

At the signal the line of contestants wavered, and plunged forward into the shallow stream. To the laughing spectators there seemed to be a general rush and outburst of excitement, but, as a matter of fact, the greater number of contestants started their ponies rather leisurely. Their experience advised them to make haste slowly. A forty or fifty mile race is not always to those who first leave the post.

There were, however, quite enough hasty ones to raise a wild splashing and turmoil, as, whooping and yelling, they spurred their ponies through the water and swirled away at a gallop. Some wheeled up the coulée; a few rode straight across at the steep bank. Vandervyn, wildest and

noisiest of all, headed downstream for the road, spurring his pinto, and lashing his pack horse with a rawhide quirt. He was followed by a large bunch.

Hardy started after these last, holding his mare to her usual steady trot. When he came up the road to the head of the gulley, those who had gone before him were all quite a distance ahead, with Vandervyn still in the lead. Hardy held to the trot until he was over the rise of the divide. He then put the mare into a gallop for a mile. When he again drew her down to a trot, the others were still ahead of him, and Vandervyn was gaining on all except a few.

To keep such a pace as the leader was setting would surely wind the soundest of horses within the first quarter of the race. Midway between the mouth of the valley and the Agency, the long-striding mare began to pass ponies whose riders had thought better of their whirlwind start. Others were still loping in swift pursuit of Vandervyn.

Hardy walked the mare up the slope of the Agency terrace. He saw nothing of Dupont or Marie, and the Indians had moved away with their tepees. But in the rear of the warehouse he caught a glimpse of two Indian policemen removing the load from Vandervyn's pack pony. His face clouded. He put the mare into a gallop.

All the way to the head of the valley he held

to a steady gallop that successively brought him up with and past all except six or seven of the foremost racers. At the steeper ascents of the canyon trail he drew in to a trot and at times even to a walk, but he gave the mare her head on every level stretch. One after another, he passed the remaining leaders. The best of the ponies were no match in speed with the big thoroughbred.

At last only Vandervyn was ahead. Hardy did not come up behind him until they were within a short mile of the place where the canyon opened out. When Vandervyn looked back and saw his pursuer, he urged the pinto to sprinting speed with merciless spurring. To put an end to the punishment of the luckless beast, Hardy sent the mare racing into the lead at the first widening of the trail.

As he overhauled and forged past Vandervyn he watched him alertly. In the moment that they were side by side the young fellow turned, and met his gaze with a look of mocking hate. Hardy had expected to see anger and perhaps despair in the blue eyes of his rival. The most furious rage would not have rendered him so uneasy at that expression of mockery.

He glanced back several times, prepared to fling himself flat alongside the pommel of his saddle. His uneasiness did not lessen when he perceived that Vandervyn had checked the pinto's mad pace without making any move to draw his revolver. Hardy pulled the mare in to

a trot. A few seconds later Vandervyn halted, and scrambled down from the trail to get a drink out of the creek. The crease in Hardy's forehead deepened. Such unconcern as his rival had shown was perplexing, to say the least.

Ahead the walls of the canyon were sloping back. The rangy trot of the mare soon brought him out into the widened valley where had been the first Indian camp. Dogs, Indians, and tepees, all were gone. Only a brush-walled dance-lodge and a heap or two of wood ashes remained to mark the camp site.

As the mare pounded past, she curved her outstretched neck towards the lodge, and whinnied. Hardy heard no answer to the call, but his frown suddenly deepened. He reached forward and stroked the mare's sleek neck. Hot as had been the race from the Agency, she had not turned a hair. His frown relaxed. Yet his tight lips showed that he was still uneasy. He balanced himself in his stirrups, and began to ride as lightly as possible.

Ascending the mountain-side, he was compelled to content himself with the mare's nervous, long-strided walk. But whenever the trail was not too steep or rough, he put her into a trot, and varied the pace with an occasional short gallop.

An hour passed. He was already well into the mountains. He came to a succession of steep climbs and descents that held the mare down to a walk. Presently he thought he heard hoof-

beats behind him. He listened. He had not been mistaken. An unshod horse was coming up with him at a steady jog trot.

It seemed impossible that Vandervyn's pinto could have so recuperated from that whirlwind heading of the rush as to be able to take this steep trail at a trot. Hardy gazed back, expecting to see one of the cowboys. As he went down over a ridge crest, the rider came up the ridge back across the intervening gulch. The man snatched off his broad-brimmed hat to wave a salute. The sun glinted with a golden sheen on the unmistakable blond head of Vandervyn.

At the first small break in the descent Hardy dismounted, unsaddled, and sponged out the mare's mouth and nostrils with water from his canteen. He then shook out and refolded his Navajo saddle-blanket, and started to re-saddle. But before he buckled the cinch-strap, he shifted his pistol from his breast to a front pocket in his riding-breeches.

He was vigorously grooming the mare when Vandervyn came jogging down through the thickets of tall brush that grew close on each side of the trail. He did not pause in his rubbing until the nimble-footed unshod pony ambled into view, less than a dozen yards up the trail. Then he glanced about, straightened, and stood staring, struck motionless with amazement. The pony was a pinto.

Vandervyn, smiling with insolent exultance,

rode down to him, his right hand jauntily poised on his hip, over the hilt of his revolver. His eyes challenged his rival with an audacious, provoking stare. But Hardy looked only at the pinto.

It could not possibly be the same pony that had raced all the way from the butte up through the canyon of Sioux Creek. There was no sign of dried sweat-lather on his rough coat, no spur-marks on his flanks. He breathed without wheezing. There was no weariness in his gait. He was fresh — Yet so perfect was the match that Hardy could see nothing in either his color or shape or size to distinguish him from the first pinto.

"Lots of come-back to a bronco, Captain," purred Vandervyn. "Sorry to see that you've stove up your mare. She's too high-bred for a rocky road like this. But you might take off her shoes and travel light, the way I've done."

The pony was now ambling down the slope past the mare. Hardy looked at the unshod hoofs. They were covered with a coating of clay mire from the bottom of the last gulch, and the beast's shuffling pace did not expose the under surface of the hoofs. Whether the pony had or had not been recently unshod could not be seen.

"Great horse, my little old pinto, eh?" mocked Vandervyn. "Bye-bye! I'll tell Marie you'll be along later."

Hardy perceived in a flash why he had seen neither the girl nor her father at the Agency.

Swiftly he wheeled about to mount. Startled by the quick action, Vandervyn spurred his pony, and went down the steep descent at a gait far from easy on even a mountain-bred horse's knees. Hardy followed at a walk. The opposite rise was gradual. He let the mare take it at a slow trot. At the top was a fairly level stretch of trail. Vandervyn was far ahead. Hardy put the mare into a fast gallop. A few minutes brought her up so close behind the loping pinto that Vandervyn spurred his beast to sprinting speed. Hardy followed at an easier yet swift pace that again brought him near, as the pinto slackened to a lope.

A steep ridge made a break in the game. The pinto crossed it at a jog trot. The mare had to walk. Beyond was a long stretch of broken country that favored the pinto. He could jog over ground that held the mare to a walk, and canter where she could no more than trot. On such a trail he was fully equal to traveling at these paces for twelve hours at a stretch, all the time in the lead of the mare. Of this Hardy was as well aware as was Vandervyn.

Though he steadily lost ground, he kept on in pursuit, coolly studying the landmarks ahead and "lifting" his mare along over the heart-breaking trail. To have given way to the impatience that betrayed itself in his flashing eyes would inevitably have lost him the race by overstraining the mare. He held himself grimly in hand, and

eased the going for his eager mount with consummate horsemanship.

When they reached better ground, Vandervyn was again far ahead. But Hardy had his reward for his restraint in the resilient stride of the mare as she swung into a full gallop. Up and down the long easy slopes, around a curving mountain-side, and along the level bench of a stream bank, she held to the cross-country racing-pace that rapidly rolled up mile after mile of the trail.

In less than half an hour she brought her rider around a sharp bend only a few hundred yards behind the pinto. Vandervyn, over-confident, was jogging along the level when the sound of the approaching hoof-beats threw him into a half-panic. There was still a long stretch of easy trail ahead. He put his pony into a gallop. The long-legged thoroughbred, still running as smoothly as clock-work, continued to gain. Vandervyn began to swing his spurs.

The pinto started to pull ahead. Hardy held the mare to the same speed as before. It was a speed that he knew she could maintain for miles. He could see that the pinto was being forced to a killing pace—a pace that must strain if not break him before they came to the next rough ground.

On up the valley rushed the pursued, now barely holding his own. The cruel spurring and whip-slashing could not sting the failing beast to

greater exertions. He was blowing hard; his rough coat was lathered with sweat. He began to lose.

At last the trail made a sharp turn, and started to zigzag up the mountain-side. The pinto was staggering when he reached the foot of the ascent. Vandervyn sprang off, and drove him at a slow walk up the first steep climb. Hardy came to the foot only a half-minute later. He also sprang off, and started up afoot.

The quicker and longer stride of the mare soon brought them up at Vandervyn's heels. The pitch of the mountain was too precipitous for Hardy to risk passing on the lower side of the narrow trail with the mare, and Vandervyn kept the pinto close to the upper side.

"You have no right to block the trail," said Hardy. "Allow me to pass."

Vandervyn looked over his shoulder with an insolent sneer. "Go on and pass, if you're in a hurry. You've got all outdoors to do it in. If that's not room enough, shoot me in the back and take the trail. I'll not get out of it for you."

Hardy did not reply, nor did he attempt to force a passage. At the next turn Vandervyn rushed his pony past the widened space with a sudden spurt. Hardy halted to again sponge out the mare's mouth and nostrils and rub her down. She was as eager as ever, but he knew that the last gallop had told on her severely. To so nearly break the tough bronco had cost a heavy price.

The pity was that there had not been another half-mile in which to force the pace. Hardy frowned as he went over in his mind the trail ahead. He had good reason to feel displeased. Though the mare easily overtook the slow-walking pinto before he had reached the round of the mountain shoulder, the change of pace had in a measure enabled the pony to recuperate. He bore Vandervyn away over the summit and down the other side at his nimble dog-trot.

There followed a grueling test of endurance and horsemanship. Vandervyn's trickery had given him a great advantage. Against it were pitted the officer's generalship, his iron will, and an almost photographic memory of every yard of the trail. And against the whalebone toughness of the bronco were pitted the speed and high spirit of the thoroughbred. Her rider had only to call upon her to do her very worst, and she would run until she dropped dead. Twice he could have headed Vandervyn by trotting her uphill, but he refrained.

At last, twelve miles from the goal of the heart-breaking race, came the opportunity for which he had been waiting. The trail smoothed out in another easy stretch. For this he had been holding the mare in hand. He started at a canter, and gradually let her strike into her long, swift gallop. Vandervyn saw them coming, and at once put spurs to his luckless pony.

As before, Hardy held the mare down to her

best long-distance steeplechase speed. It was within the stride of her long legs. But to equal it, the pinto had to sprint at a gait that racked him. After the first mile Vandervyn could not keep him from lagging. Yard by yard he lost ground. The mare came up close behind. There was no saving ascent or descent short of another mile, and beside the trail there was clear ground for passing. The mare came up alongside the pinto and forged ahead.

Hardy eyed Vandervyn with utmost wariness. And as before, at the head of the canyon of Sioux Creek, Vandervyn turned in the saddle, and looked full at him with a hateful mocking smile. He pulled in his staggering pony to a walk the moment Hardy swung into the trail ahead.

At once Hardy eased down the mare to a trot. She was now showing unmistakably the terrific strain of the unfair race. In the circumstances most riders would have been satisfied to walk her. There were still many miles of hard trail ahead. But Hardy kept her at the rapid trot all the way to the next rise. He knew that the pinto was now broken. Yet that look of Vandervyn's had given warning of further treachery. He glanced back frequently, and between times scanned the shrubs and rocks on either side of the trail with an anxious scrutiny.

Though he saw no third pinto waiting in the thickets, his eyes grew hard and cold with grim determination. He was examining his rifle when

a turn of the trail suddenly gave him his first view of the broken-topped mountain and the ridge-side where Redbear had made the second attempt to assassinate him. As he looked at the shattered summit, his hazel eyes flashed. He thrust the rifle back into its sheath, and drew the mare down to a walk.

Behind him he heard a muffled drumming of unshod hoofs. Vandervyn was coming up at a gallop.

CHAPTER XXVI

STARK COURAGE

WHEN the mocking trickster came up behind Hardy, he reined in to a jog trot, and, as before, rode past him with his hand on his hip.

There were marked differences between the third pinto and the two first. He was taller and leaner, and one of his feet was white. But Hardy appeared to be too dejected to heed the fact. He bent over his pommel in an attitude of sullen despair, and barely glanced up as Vandervyn passed. He had the despondent look and air of one who is hopelessly beaten.

As the pinto ambled away in the lead, Vandervyn smiled, and looked back at his rival with all the hate gone from his face. The mare could not possibly overtake him, much less outrun the fresh pinto all the way to the mine. His look showed only boyish exultance.

"Bye-bye again, old man," he bantered. "Sorry I can't stay to keep you company. The lady is waiting—and the mine. It may also please you to hear that I have a duly signed and witnessed contract with the tribe, giving me a fee of twenty per cent on all moneys appropriated in

payment to the tribe for their mineral lands. Let's hear you congratulate me. Show you're game! "

But Hardy did not raise his eyes. He held the weary though still willing mare to a walk. When he came to the foot of the very steep climb up the ridge of the broken-topped mountain, he slipped to the ground, and started to lead the mare.

Vandervyn was already well up the slope. He reached the castellated rocks at the top of the ridge before Hardy had plodded up the first half of the ascent. He turned about to wave his hat, but as Hardy paid no attention to him, he soon turned his pinto back into the trail and rode on around the castellated rocks.

Hardy led the mare on up to the shelf of rock where, during his first trip, his abrupt dismounting had saved him from Redbear's bullet. There he stopped the mare, and dropped back alongside her. From above he would have appeared to be leaning upon her withers in an attitude of despair. In reality, his shapely mouth was curved in a resolute smile, and the hand hidden by his head and shoulders was rapidly transferring articles from the saddlebags to his pockets — three or four little packets of food, a pocket axe, a handful of pistol cartridges, and the legal notices for posting a mining claim.

He glanced up the slope, and, seeing no sign of Vandervyn, stripped off the mare's bridle. When he had fastened it to the saddle, he sponged out

her nostrils and mouth with the last water in his canteen, and headed her along the ridge to a little patch of bunchgrass. She understood, and began to graze, but as she munched the rich grass she frequently raised her head to watch her master climb the steep slope of the broken-topped mountain.

Hardy took the ascent at an unhurried pace that wasted no time or energy in useless movements and mistaken leads. He reached the place where he had found the bloody trail of Redbear. Up the cleft the climbing was not so stiff. He came out above the gap, and picked a cleft on the opposite side that led through to the far slope of the mountain. This time he had neither the dusk nor the thought of following the assassin to mislead him.

On the way down the cleft he had to descend two dangerous ledges. But carefulness and cool judgment brought him to the foot of each without a fall. He came out on the valley slope, extremely hot and dry but not out of breath. Drawing an air-line across to the opposite mountain-side where he had seen the light of Ti-owa-konza's camp-fire through the darkness, he started down into the valley at a jog trot as brisk as that of the third pinto.

By the time he came to the stream he was parched and gasping from heat and thirst. He plunged his head into the water, rinsed out his mouth three or four times, took a single sip, and

started on, refreshed. The ascent to the site of Ti-owa-konza's camp again parched him. He was almost spent as he tottered through the pines up the last slope. The camp was gone, but he knew the nearest way to the spring.

He rested two or three minutes, repeatedly cooling his head in the spring and rinsing out his mouth, but drinking only a very few sips. Again refreshed, he half filled his canteen, and started on up the easy mountain-slope at a steady jog.

Ten minutes brought him over the summit to the sharp pitch above the mine. Smoke was rising from the stovepipe of the cabin. He stared down at the terrace several moments, however, before he made out the figures of a man and woman waiting at the first turn of the trail. There could be no doubt that the two were Marie and her father. It was no less certain that Vandervyn had not yet arrived. Even had he suspected his opponent's stratagem, he scarcely could have covered the seven miles of trail in as short a time as Hardy had taken to make the three miles across country.

The two watchers never thought to look about and up the mountain. Hardy started to zigzag down the roof-like pitch of the mountain-side to the spur along which he had traced the apex of the mineral vein from the top of the mine shaft. He made the descent without slipping and without dislodging any stones. The watchers had

not yet looked about when he came down upon the crest of the spur.

A large newly cut stake, set up conspicuously on its head, gave him a hint where one of the upper corners of the claim should be located. He cut his own stake from a branch of the nearest pine with his razor-edged pocket-axe, drove it into the ground with a stone, and tacked on one of his legal notices. He then paced across to where another stake indicated the proper place for the other upper corner, and swiftly repeated the making of his own stake and posting of the notice.

He hastened to the curb of the mine-shaft and posted another notice. He was now in plain view from the cabin, but out of sight of the watchers down on the trail. He descended to the terrace to post his two remaining notices at the corners so obligingly located by Dupont. He was careful to pick out a green branch for his first stake. Yet the soft thudding of his axe-blows must have reached the watchers.

As he was working the stake into a bed of loose rocks, he heard an angry exclamation over near the cabin. Dupont and Marie had come around the end of the building, and were staring at him the girl in wide-eyed amazement, her father in astonished chagrin that burst into rage as Hard glanced up. In a frenzy of disappointed avarice the trader reached for his revolver. Still more swiftly Marie flung herself upon him.

"No! no! you shall not!" she cried. "Leave it to him — he is so near! Let them play out the game!"

Hardy was stooping to tack his notice to the stake. He caught up his axe, and ran across to cut his last stake. Between the axe-blows could be heard the hoof-beats of a galloping horse. He trimmed the stake. The hoof-beats now sounded very near. He tacked the notice on the stake and looked around for a stone. There was none at hand. He chopped a small hole with his axe in the hard soil and set up the stake.

At that moment Vandervyn loped up over the edge of the terrace, waving his hat to Marie. Then he caught sight of Hardy, over beyond the girl, and the exultant yell died on his lips. He put the curb on his pony, and sprang off beside Dupont and the girl, his face frightful with rage.

His voice was high-pitched and light, almost airy: "So — he cut across afoot! He thought to do me!"

"*Has*, you mean!" snarled Dupont. "Got his notices posted. That's his last stake."

Vandervyn whirled, and snatched his rifle from its saddle-sheath. Marie caught her father's arm to drag him aside; but he was already backing away, his eyes fixed apprehensively on Hardy. It was time for bullets to come streaming from the automatic pistol. Hardy could have drawn and opened fire while Vandervyn was freeing his rifle.

To the astonishment of all three, Hardy made no attempt to "get the drop" on his opponent. Instead, he started to advance upon Vandervyn at a quick deliberate pace, his hands hanging empty at his sides, his face calm and stern.

"Put down that gun!" he commanded.

Vandervyn was leveling the rifle. He took aim straight between Hardy's eyes. His finger kissed the trigger. The slightest twitch would have sent the bullet crashing through Hardy's brain, and the slightest sign of fear or hesitancy on Hardy's part would have caused that twitch. He was looking death in the face. Vandervyn was in a murderous fury.

Yet Hardy came on,—quick, steady, absolutely calm. His gaze passed above the deadly muzzle, along the foreshortened barrel, to the narrow-lidded bloodshot eyes of Vandervyn. His voice rang out again, clear and sharp with authority:

"Put down that rifle—put it down, sir!"

The muscles of Vandervyn's neck twitched. Along the top of the barrel he was glaring back at Hardy—glaring into those hazel eyes that met his fury with the clear cool gaze of absolute courage. The sheer nerve of that steady approach to his rifle muzzle compelled him to pause. It disconcerted him; it struck a chill into the heat of his frenzy.

Still Hardy advanced, swift and steady, his gaze never so much as flickering. Now his eyes

and forehead, close beyond the foresight of the rifle, appeared enormously enlarged to Vandervyn's distorted vision. Steadily Hardy put up his hand, took hold of the rifle barrel, and turned the muzzle aside.

"Ah-h-h!" gasped Marie.

Hardy drew the rifle out of Vandervyn's relaxing grasp.

"Stand aside, sir!" he quietly commanded.

"I wish to speak alone with Miss Dupont."

Vandervyn had parted with his rifle as if dazed. At the sound of Hardy's voice a fresh wave of crimson flooded his face. He stepped back, and jerked out his revolver. Hardy leaped upon him like a panther, and struck the weapon aside. The heavy bullet whizzed past Hardy's head. A moment later, Vandervyn, though the younger and perhaps the stronger of the two, reeled away, clutching his lacerated trigger finger. Hardy stood with the revolver in his hand. He turned to Marie.

"May I ask for a few words alone with you?"

"No!" Vandervyn hoarsely forbade the girl.

"You shall not speak with him. Jake, you're her father — tell her she shall not."

"You know she don't never mind what I say," mumbled Dupont. "Anyway, it sort of looks like Cap is running this here shindy."

Hardy had not glanced away from Marie. Throughout that supreme test of the will-power and courage of her two lovers, she had stood

tense and silent, as if spellbound. She now looked from one to the other, her face inscrutably calm, her black eyes fathomless.

"I will hear what Captain Hardy has to say," she said.

Hardy motioned her father and Vandervyn towards the mine-dump. They obeyed.

"We are alone," said Marie.

Hardy smiled. "I won the race."

"Was it fair, cutting across country?" she asked.

"Fair? Then you did not know of his scheme."

"What scheme? I do not understand."

"It does not now matter. I won the race and — the mine."

"Do you expect me to rejoice with you?" asked the girl. "It has cost my father his half of the mine."

"How so? He is not an entryman."

"Reggie gave him a deed to a half-interest."

"I see," said Hardy. "Quite in keeping. The deed is absolutely void, and would have been no less so even had the grantor been first to reach here."

"You doubt his good faith!" The girl glanced past him towards the sullen figure of Vandervyn on the mine-dump with her father. "So you thought it better to take it all yourself than to let him take it all?"

"Yes," agreed Hardy.

The girl's red lips curved in an ironical smile.

"I do not go with the mine — necessarily."

"No. But the mine necessarily goes with you — now," replied Hardy.

"Be so kind as to explain. I understood that you were ordered to Alaska."

"Were you not told of my return as far as the butte?"

"Then your orders to leave were countermanded," Marie evaded the question.

His eyes darkened, and his face contracted as if from a twinge of pain. But he replied with quiet steadiness: "That is of no consequence. May I ask if you consider my word good?"

"Yes." The answer was given without an instant's hesitation.

He smiled gravely. "You cannot think I came back to win the mine for myself. You have my word that I will assign it to you as soon as I have the legal right."

"To me? But why?" The dilating eyes of the girl showed her utter surprise and astonishment. "Why? There, that last night at the Agency, you showed that you despised me."

"Never that," he disclaimed. "I was bitter — harsh. But the suddenness of the discovery that you and he — Let us not talk of that. It is past. I would not have come back to trouble you, only —" Again he stopped. "I had to come back and do this thing. It was necessary that you should become owner of the mine — sole owner."

It is to be yours, not his. Promise me that you will never give him any share in it. That is all I ask."

"I will not promise unless you tell me your reason for asking it, and unless you tell me your reason for doing what you have done."

Hardy whitened. "Very well, then. It is simply this — If you own the mine, he will wish to marry you."

"If I — But he already wishes to — " The girl hesitated, and fell silent, her black eyebrows bent in thought.

"I do not seek to persuade you to the contrary," said Hardy. "All I ask is that you give me your promise to allow him no share in the mine."

Marie looked down. After a silence she answered in a low tone: "I promise."

"That is all," he said. "I must now be going."

"Wait," she urged. "You have not told me why — why you have done this."

"Is it necessary?" he replied. "Please do not fancy it is because I am at all unselfish. You have promised yourself to him. Knowing that I no longer had even a fighting chance, I have merely sought to make sure that he — that you should have at least a fair opportunity to be happy. That is all."

He lingered a moment for a last look at her beautiful face, upon which had fallen the inscru-

table stolidity of the Indian in her nature. No other expression could have so completely confirmed him in his belief that he had lost his fighting chance to win her. He faced about to return up the mountain the way he had come.

Marie stood as he left her, silent and immobile, following his brisk ascent up the path to the mine-shaft with a wide-eyed gaze that perceived the objective image, yet at the same time seemed to be looking inward. A purpling that shaded the blue-blackness of her eyes to violet-black alone betrayed the intensity of her emotion.

The receding figure had passed along the spur to the foot of the steep ascent up the mountain before the girl became aware that Vandervyn was close beside her. He started to pass behind, to where Hardy had dropped the rifle and revolver. In a flash of swift movement she sprang ahead of him and set her foot upon the rifle barrel.

"You shall not."

Her voice was low and seemingly tranquil, her face as stolid as before, but the look in her eyes made him hesitate. He glanced about at Dupont. The trader had turned his back on Hardy, and was staring fixedly into the valley at a party of Indians that had come down the far side and were pitching their camp in the meadow. It was evident that he did not propose to be a witness to anything Vandervyn might do.

"*Mon père,*" quietly called Marie.

He shot a startled glance at her, hesitated, and came over to them. Vandervyn's eyes were upturned to the figure on the mountain-side in a look of hate that was not pleasant to see. Dupont followed the menacing stare, and then glanced away as if caught in a guilty act. Fast as Hardy was scaling the ascent, he was still within easy rifle-shot and would continue to be for several minutes.

Vandervyn moistened his dry lips, and muttered hoarsely: "Take her into the cabin. She — won't let me — do it."

Dupont coughed, and spoke in a husky voice. "Come into the cabin, Marie."

"No," she replied.

"But listen, girl," he urged. "No one won't never know, and we won't be looking. We can lay it on that same buck Indian what has tried to git him twice a'ready. There's a lot of 'em just come into the valley — Don't look at me that way. The dirty sneak has took our mine away from us — he done it by a trick, cutting 'cross afoot. Mr. Van can't afford to marry you if me and him don't git the mine."

"What if I should get it?" asked the girl, with no shade of change in her inscrutable calm.

Vandervyn whirled upon her, his face convulsed with jealous fury. "So that's it! You've sold yourself to him! You —" He stopped, silenced by her look.

After a pause she quietly remarked: "He gives me the mine. He is going away, I do not know where. Instead of you, I am to be the owner of the mine. Do you wish to marry me?"

CHAPTER XXVII

A WEDDING POSTPONED

VANDERVYN'S face darkened with suspicion.

"If you're not playing me, then he has lied to you, in order to get away from us."

Marie's lips curved in a half-smile. "He gave me his word of honor. Do you doubt it?"

The young man's jaw dropped slack. He could not even pretend to doubt her statement or Hardy's word. He looked down, his brows knotted and eyes contracted with intense thought.

Dupont took the news in a far different manner.

"By Gar!" he exulted. "He's going to give you the mine? You're dead sure of it? By Gar! I call that mighty square of Cap. It's white! And me a-thinking he done it all to git back at us. It sure is white of Cap. Why, it's nearly the same like he had give it to me!"

"He named only one condition," remarked Marie.

Vandervyn started, and looked up at her. She met him with a level glance that told nothing of what she was thinking.

"One condition," she repeated. "It was my promise not to give you any share in the mine."

"Me?" queried Dupc .t.

"No."

"I see," threatened Vandervyn. "He thinks to force you from having anything to do with me."

"On the contrary, he seemed to think it would — not prevent our marrying."

Vandervyn stared in bewilderment. Hardy's action seemed incredible. Then he thought he perceived the explanation, and rallied from his perplexity. His frown gave place to a cynical smile.

"O-ho, my lady! I see. You worked him with the soft pedal — the saphead! the easymark! He's just the kind of duffer to fall for the wail of a pretty girl with a tear in her eye and a quaver in her throat. Good for you, sweetheart! You beat him at his own game. He tried a bluff, thinking you'd be silly enough to throw me over for him. You called him, and he had to make good. The fool — to think you'd be soft enough to turn from me to him, just because he made a play to the galleries with his offer! Oh, what an easymark!"

"Is that exactly the right term?" calmly inquired the girl.

"None better!" exulted Vandervyn. "He made you promise not to give me a share in the mine. Mining property is real estate. An agreement in regard to real estate is not binding unless in writing."

Marie's tranquil face took on an expression of artless concern. "Oh, really? Then his promise to give me the mine is not binding."

"Don't worry," reassured Vandervyn. "He will keep his word. You are sure of the mine."

"But of course, if I take back my promise, it will be no more than fair to give him the chance to take back his," she innocently remarked.

"Not at all, sweetheart," he replied. "You can do as you please. A woman's promises are not considered binding—in business matters. Legally, in most of the States, she is rated as a minor."

"Wimmen ain't minors no longer in our State," interjected Dupont.

"Thank you for reminding me, *Père*," said his daughter. She looked at Vandervyn with naïve seriousness. "So you see I must keep my promise."

"Oh, I say now, don't be a —" He detected something behind her look of childlike artlessness, and hastened to concede the point. "But of course if you feel that way about it! You will not have to break your promise after — The law will then make your property mine. So that is settled, sweetheart. Now comes the main question. When shall we be married?"

The girl quivered at the word. He stepped close, and looked deep into her eyes, his own glowing golden with ardor. She dropped her

gaze, and drew back from him as if confused by the suddenness of his proposal.

"I—must think," she murmured. "Would it not be best to—wait until he has given me the mine?"

"Not when you have his word that he will do it. Anyway, there's no harm in naming the day. Come, make it an early one!"

The girl's rich color deepened with a blush.

"Not now!" she replied, struggling to recover her composure. "You must wait. Perhaps tomorrow—but now I—" She glanced around as if looking for a way of escape. There was no promise of succor in her father's complacent grin. Her gaze darted down into the valley; it rested upon the encamping Indians. "Look," she murmured. "That is Thunderbolt's tepee. I am going down to see him. He should be told that he may be prosecuted if he hunts here now. It is no longer tribal land."

"There's no need, sweetheart," said Vander-vyn. "I will see to it that no one interferes with the chief and his band."

"I shall go down and tell him," she insisted. "No, do not come with me."

He frowned at her wilfulness, shrugged, and turned to Dupont.

"Come into the cabin, Jake, and give me a drop of something," he urged. "I'm dry as a bone. That ride wasn't any joke!"

Marie was already hastening down the moun-

tain-slope into the valley. When she came to the camp, she was received with pleasant greetings. The keen eyes of the Indians had long ago perceived and recognized the white people on the terrace.

The venerable figure of Ti-owa-konza appeared in the entrance of the biggest tepee. He disappeared. A moment later three women came out of the tepee, and one of them told the girl that the chief wished her to go in. She stooped, and passed through the low opening.

The chief was seated at the far side of the tepee near an outstretched blanketed form. There was no one else present. He beckoned Marie to come across to him. As she approached, she saw that the hair of the still figure before him was braided after the fashion of the maidens of the tribe. She bent over, and looked into a face that was so thin and pale that at first she did not recognize it. The large sunken eyes opened, and looked up at her with a startled gaze.

"Oinna!" she exclaimed, and she knelt down beside the girl. "You are ill."

"No — Go 'way, please," begged the wretched girl. A slow flush reddened her wan face. She sought to turn from the visitor. "I want to be alone. I am 'shamed. Go 'way, please."

Marie looked up at Ti-owa-konza. He saw the pity in her eyes, and spoke softly in Lakotah:

"Rose who art white yet red, in the flower of the golden lily a worm is gnawing. The golden

lily withers. Pluck out the worm, else she will fade and go from me."

He stood up, and wrapped his blanket about him and went out.

An hour passed. Through the canvas wall of the tent those outside heard a low murmuring and at times the sound of sobbing. At last Marie raised the edge of the tepee, and spoke to a group of women. One of them hastened to fetch from the fire a bowl of hot broth. She went into the tepee, and at once came out again without the bowl.

There followed another long wait. But no more crying could be heard, and gradually the sound of the low voices within the tepee died away to silence. Ti-owa-konza came back to the entrance, listened awhile, and noiselessly slipped inside.

Oinna lay with her head on Marie's breast. Her eyes were closed. She had fallen into the peaceful healing slumber of childhood. A smile hovered on her half-parted lips. The bowl beside her was empty.

Very gently Marie laid the sleeping girl's head upon a blanket-roll, and rose to come across to the silent grandfather. They talked for several minutes in Lakotah. When she stepped past him and left the tepee, his face was still set in the stocial calm of the Indian warrior of his generation, but his proud old eyes were glistening with gratitude and stern joy.

The sun had set, and the twilight was already fading. By the time Marie's slow step brought her up to the terrace, the valley and mountainslope were dusky with the shadow of approaching nightfall. Within the cabin Dupont had lit one of the mine candles. The candlestick was an empty whisky bottle. Another bottle, not yet empty, stood on the rough deal table between the two men.

"Hello, girly!" sang out Vandervyn, as Marie paused in the open doorway. He sprang up to come around the table to her. "I've been languishing for you all afternoon. Would've chased down the hill, only your dad said you'd get on your ear if I did."

"Yes," quietly replied the girl. She had raised her hand to shield her face from the candle, as if the light dazzled her. As she spoke, she stepped in and along the side of the table opposite him, apparently not seeing him. "Yes, I would not have cared to see you. I was nursing one of the girls down in the camp."

Vandervyn stopped short. "It wasn't anything infectious, I hope."

"No. I shall not suffer from the same trouble. But I am very tired. I see you and *Père* have eaten. You might finish the bottle outside."

"How about a kiss to sweeten the toddy?" he suggested.

She burst into a tantalizing little laugh. "I fear you must take yours straight for a while,

Reggie. You are still engaged to your cousin, I believe — Good night, *Père*."

Dupont, heavy with food and liquor, mumbled a response, and stumbled out into the dusk, reluctantly followed by Vandervyn. Marie flung their blankets out after them and barred the door.

In the morning Vandervyn was relieved to find that the night's rest had lightened her mood. She cooked a delicious little breakfast, and was pleased to be very gracious to him. The anxiety with which he had met her at the cabin door soon vanished. He fell into the gallantry of an accepted suitor who is very much in love and a bit uncertain of his conquest.

He waited until Dupont went to fetch the horses before he ventured to reopen the question of questions: "Sweetheart, you've had time to think it over and decide. Tell me, when is to be the happy day?"

"Yes," she murmured, "I have thought it over."

"You will name an early date!" he exclaimed, assured by the coy sweetness of her look.

Her smile faded, and she drooped forward in an attitude of humility that he had never before seen her pride permit. She replied in a meek voice: "Oh, no, no! I must do what is just by you. Think what it would be like for you to take back with you as your wife a quarterbreed girl straight off an Indian Reservation."

Vandervyn winced, rallied, and rejoined with ardor: "Let them think what they please, so long as you *are* my wife!"

"That is most gallant and — brave of you!" she murmured. "But — there is also *Père*."

Vandervyn bit his lip. "Need *he* come along?"

Marie looked up, her eyes full of tender reproach.

"I did not think that of you, Reggie. How can I leave *him* here alone? You have never seemed to realize that I came back from Ottawa because I wished to be with him. Even before I went to convent I saw the traits in him that you see, but also I saw something more — the man that he might have been."

"Don't imagine I'm asking you to give him up," Vandervyn hastened to disclaim. "All I suggest is that we take our honeymoon trip alone."

"And leave *Père* with no one to cook for him — leave him *here*! Can't you guess what would happen? Within a week — a fortnight at the utmost — he would marry the youngest and best cook within reach, a breed girl by preference — most likely Charlie's sister."

Vandervyn winced as if cut across the face with a whiplash.

"Not — not her!" he stammered. "That — it would be impossible! She would be — I tell you, I will not stand for it — I cannot!"

"Of course that could not be permitted," sweetly agreed Marie. "I would not care to come back and find I had acquired a stepmother as young or younger than myself — no, not even if she were as clean and as good a girl as is Oinna Redbear."

"Then — you — think —" hesitated Vandervyn.

"Listen. I have thought and thought, and now I have it all planned out. I must do what is just by you, yet, as you see, I cannot leave *Père* here. You may remember that I told you a little about the English people I knew in Ottawa. When I saw that you thought I was romancing, I said no more except in hints. I really was more intimate with Lady Verlaine than you will find it easy to believe. Her son and daughters were already married. She took a fancy to me. When I was to come home, she invited me to visit her in England. I had told her all about myself and *Père*. We correspond regularly. She has renewed her invitation more than once. The last time she insisted that I should come without farther delay, and bring *Père* with me."

"She did?" exclaimed Vandervyn. "Then why not all three of us go together?"

Marie drooped again in her attitude of meek humility.

"You are so generous, Reggie, to be willing to travel with *Père*! But I cannot allow you to make such a sacrifice. No; there is a better way.

I shall go alone with *Père* to England, and then perhaps for a little visit in Paris with the sister of the Mother Superior of my convent. *Père* has never forgotten his French-Canadian dialect, and I have been tinkering it into fairly good French. A month or two in Paris may correct his accent. It may also smooth down our roughnesses enough for us to venture over to Washington without putting you too greatly to shame before your friends."

"Two months!—all that time?" complained Vandervyn.

"Indeed, no. It will be much longer," answered the girl. "I cannot permit you to marry a mere Agency girl. Besides, if *Père* does not wish to sell out his cattle business, I may have to wait for returns from the mine. It takes quantities of money to buy polish, and lots of time to put it on. We shall not reach Washington before November or December."

"Five or six months!"

"Yes. Aren't you willing to wait for me?" asked the girl, bridleing.

The sudden change from meekness won a hasty assurance from Vandervyn: "Of course I am. It will be a fearfully long time to be without you, if you insist upon— But I could run over and see you in England or France."

"No," she refused. "I wish you to stay and work for the good of my people. *Père* and I still are members of the tribe, you know, and I am

deeply interested in the irrigation project laid out by Captain Hardy."

Vandervyn smiled in his most boyish manner.

"I am neither an engineer nor an army officer. Some one else must dig the ditches. I shall at once go on to Washington and prepare for the passage of the appropriation. It's going to slide through as soon as Congress meets."

"And then I shall come over from Paris. You will break off your engagement with your cousin, and we — No, no, sir! not a single kiss — not one until you are free, and I set the day. I am an heiress now, and must act accordingly. Besides, here is *Père* with the horses. We must be starting."

CHAPTER XXVIII

TILTING AT WINDMILLS

THE early winter rains that followed an ideal Indian summer at the national capital were chill and sleety. But Congress was now in session, and Washington was bright and gay with the activities of officialdom and official society.

One of the first events of the season had been a ball in honor of the superb French beauty and heiress Miss Dupont. She had arrived with a matronly French lady well known in Parisian society; a tall, olive-tinted maid, who was said to be of Spanish or Hindu origin; and a male relative, Monsieur Jacques Dupont, who spoke French with French-Canadian idioms and English with a quaint sprinkling of Western Americanisms. By those who saw him before they had the pleasure and privilege of meeting Miss Dupont, he was said to be quite "impossible." But after meeting her, they usually agreed with the general verdict that he was decidedly amusing and "picturesque."

Letters to the wives of three or four ambassadors opened to the heiress the doors of the most exclusive official society, and her wonderful

beauty and charm carried all before her by storm. Men raved over her eyes; women over her French gowns. She soon had a suite of devoted admirers and suitors, among whom, despite his engagement to the daughter of his eminent uncle, Mr. Reginald Vandervyn was one of the most ardent.

All this had come to Hardy through society reports in the newspapers and from the chance remarks of acquaintances. The remarks very seldom were made by persons fortunate enough to have attended functions graced by the presence of Miss Dupont. Hardy's neatly kept clothes were somewhat out of style, and his lodgings, in an old warren down on M Street, were cheap and shabby.

There were still better reasons for the worldly-wise to shun the company of the officer so lately distinguished for his services in the Philippines. It was whispered that the interests for which he had been diligently lobbying since midsummer were opposed to the interests of the pro-administration group of which the eminent Senator Clemmer was the leader. More openly the fact was bruited about that he was to be subjected to trial by court-martial on grave charges.

For he was still in the service.

Upon his return from the hard-won race for the mine, he had filed his claim with the commissioners, and journeyed on as soon as possible to the railroad. There he had sold his mine at a

low price, but with the option of buying her back within a year. He had then started East, too intent upon his purpose to delay even for a telegram from Vancouver Barracks, and never doubting that his commanding officer had granted him the customary leave of absence pending the acceptance of his unconditional and immediate resignation.

Great had been his consternation when, the day of his arrival in Washington, he had reported himself at the War Department. Not only had leave of absence been denied him and all action on his resignation been suspended; he had been posted for desertion. However, his record on the one hand, and the indecent haste of the attack on the other, had brought about sufficient intervention by members of the General Staff to cause several months' delay in the plan of his enemies to crush him. Action on the charges filed against him by the Indian commissioners and by his commanding officer had been postponed from month to month.

Meantime he had been placed under the nominal arrest of confinement to the limits of the District of Columbia, which left him free to pursue the ends for which he had come East. To his surprise, no contest had been filed against his mineral claim. On the contrary, he had soon found himself legally entitled to assign the mine to Marie. His carefully drawn and duly witnessed conveyance had started West in the next

mail. Marie's note of acknowledgement stated the esteem and gratitude of the writer in the most correct and conventional of terms.

His progress towards the accomplishment of his second purpose had been far less smooth. In fact, after months of persistent endeavor, he could not be sure that he had made any progress whatever. He had not been barred from an inspection of the documents relating to the new treaty with the tribe, and among them he had found Vandervyn's alleged contract. It purported to appoint the young man attorney and tribal representative and to fix his compensation at twenty per cent of any moneys appropriated to the tribe in payment for the ceded mineral lands.

Hardy had at first considered the signatures forged. But examination with a microscope had shown him that the thumb-prints were identical with those on the memorandum of the proceedings of the tribal council. He had been quick to perceive that his only chance of defeating the outrageous contract was to bring about either an executive or a congressional investigation. There had been no difficulty in divining the manner in which Vandervyn had obtained the signatures at the tribal council.

Yet so far his every move had been blocked. He had interested one man of official position or influence after another, only to be met later with evasion or procrastination or even outright re-

buffs. One door after another had been shut in his face. At last he had found himself regarded as a crank, than which, in Washington, no more opprobrious term can be applied to a man.

With the opening of Congress the influences opposed to him had at last been able to overcome the opposition that had delayed a trial of the charges against him. The afternoon that he came back to his shabby lodgings after a final attempt to obtain an interview with the Chief of the Indian Bureau, he was officially notified to appear the following morning for trial by court-martial.

He already knew the charges against him. They included desertion, failure to report at Vancouver Barracks, and, under the head of conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman, his concealment of the developed mine and of Redbear's attempt to misweigh the cattle.

The nearness of the trial brought matters to a desperate pass with him. He must act quickly.

It was the night of the first ball at the White House. As usual, there was a great crush. Hardy, in conventional evening dress—not in official costume, as the regulations required—managed in some mysterious manner to obtain entrance. The secret-service men had no instructions with regard to him, and considerable time passed before any one inimical to him heeded his unobtrusive presence.

He, in turn, was so intent upon maneuvering to have himself spoken to by that most genial of

hosts, the President, that he failed to see Marie until she spoke to him. The first sight of her bewildered him, and his bow did not altogether hide the effects of the delicious shock given him by her dazzling beauty. But he quickly recovered his self-possession when he saw that she was with Vandervyn. That young man, though more boyishly handsome than ever, bore himself with rather a sullen air. He met Hardy's clear gaze with a forced smile. The smile became still more forced when the girl transferred her hand from his arm to Hardy's.

"Only a very few minutes," she soothed the disappointed lover.

"Whatever *you* say!" he deferred to her caprice, and he drew back to speak to a sharp-eyed man near the President.

Hardy was gazing into the wonderful blue-black eyes of his companion. They were as inscrutable as when he had last looked into their depths. He tried to speak calmly, but his voice shook.

"Do you know that you are by far the most beautiful woman here?"

Her long lashes drooped and rose again to disclose the same inscrutable look.

"So I have been told several times already — I wished a few moments with you, that I might thank you for your generosity. It has given me the great opportunity of my trip abroad and this visit in Washington,"

"I am saving all the reports of your social triumphs," he said. "They have made me very happy."

Again the girl's lashes drooped. "That is good of you — It is quite necessary for me to become the rage — if I am to force a recognition from Reggie's relatives. He says that, fortunately, his *fiancée* has become interested in another man who is quite as eligible as himself."

Hardy's eyes contracted, yet he did not falter: "Since it will bring you happiness, I — wish him — good fortune."

"You do?" The question was almost an exclamation. But the girl at once regained her quiet composure. "I do not understand. If you wish him good fortune, why then do you seek to prevent him from receiving his compensation as attorney for the tribe?"

"I said *good fortune*," replied Hardy. "Any money paid him on that contract would be tainted."

Marie arched her black eyebrows. "Is it not true that he will get through a much larger appropriation than otherwise would have been made?"

"The lands are fully worth the amount agreed upon," stated Hardy. "The tribe should receive all the appropriation. Honest lobbying would carry the bill through at a cost of a few hundred dollars. These supposed friends of the tribe want millions."

"Do you wish to deprive me of the share that I would receive through him?"

"Yes — of every dishonest dollar," said Hardy, his mouth stern, though his eyes besought her to forgive his harshness. "You have enough already."

"Are you certain?" she rejoined. "You may have heard that mines often pinch out or run into valueless ore — You can guess why *Père* and I have told no one, least of all Reggie."

Hardy remained unshaken. "If he is worthy of you, that will make no difference to him."

"But myself? I am already used to luxury," pleaded the girl.

"Down in your heart you know the values in life that are real," he said. "You do not wish for wealth gained through fraud."

"I have not admitted that there is any fraud in the contract."

"Perhaps it is as well," he remarked. "You should not doubt your future husband."

She flashed him an odd, quizzical look. "No, I cannot doubt my future husband now, Captain Hardy. I must believe in him if I am to be happy, must I not?"

"Yes," agreed Hardy.

She uttered a gay little trill of laughter.

"That is so good of you to say it, Captain! It makes me feel that I really must do something for you in return. May I not offer you a little — an of, say, three or four thousand dollars? I

understand that, for some strange reason—or unreason—you have refused your pay as captain.”

“My resignation has not been withdrawn, and I am engaged in a private enterprise. I cannot draw pay as an officer in the service,” explained Hardy.

“Few would be so quixotic,” she argued. “Most would make the excuse that an attempt to frustrate what they considered a wrong to others is not to be considered a private enterprise.”

“I must beg to differ with you, Miss Dupont.”

“Then let it pass. But the little loan?”

“Very good of you to offer. However, I believe I have enough left to last me through. And in any event, I could not impose on your generosity. The money would be used against him—which, you see, would hardly do.”

“Then you refuse any loan?”

“It was most kind of you to make the offer.”

“Don Quixote de la Mancha!” she murmured.

“Tilting at machine windmills!” he replied.

Though there was no trace of bitterness or satire in his wit, her chin lifted to the angle of offended pride. “That is sufficient, Captain Hardy. May I ask you to take me back to him?”

Vandervyn was waiting for her near the President. As they approached him, she gave Hardy a look of half-relentment. “You must under-

stand, Captain, that I must do as my heart dictates, though I confess that lobbying is far from agreeable to me. I have already met His Excellency, and he has been so kind as to promise me a hearing."

"I cannot wish you success," he replied.

She gave him a quizzical glance, and turned away with Vandervyn.

Standing in the eager, jostling crowd that waited for a word or even a nod from the President, he fully appreciated the ease with which, in the midst of so great a crush, she managed to obtain several moments' conversation apart with the nation's chief magistrate.

She was still beside the President when the sharp-eyed man to whom Vandervyn had spoken came around beside Hardy, and murmured a few words in his ear. Hardy looked him in the eye, bowed, and quietly started to move away. The man followed him until he had left the White House.

CHAPTER XXIX

CONDEMNED

THE court-martial began its session at nine in the morning, and the trial of Hardy was over before three in the afternoon. Vandervyn testified to the suppression by the accused of the existence of the developed mine and of Redbear's misconduct.

Hardy's statements in explanation of his actions were as brief as they were cold and dry. Redbear's offense being the first within his knowledge, he had put the issue clerk on probation. Acting as a civil officer, he had considered the question of withholding any mention of the mine as a matter within his discretion. When interrogated whether he had not taken advantage of this suppression to enter the contest and win the mine for himself, his bald admission of the fact, unaccompanied by any explanation of his motives, was received by his officer judges with marked gravity.

The other charges were far more serious, and he opposed them with vigor. He denied emphatically any intention to desert or to remain permanently absent from his proper duties without

leave, and showed the telegram from a high official in the War Department that had led him to believe his resignation and application for leave of absence would be at once favorably acted upon by his commanding officer at Vancouver Barracks. This, in some circumstances, might have been considered sufficient excuse for his conduct. But his refusal to explain his reason for taking advantage of his secret knowledge of the mine perceptibly influenced the members of the court to doubt the statement of his purpose in coming to Washington.

Though the court-martial adjourned without rendering its findings, he left the court-room ten years older in appearance than when he entered. The regretful, commiserating glance of the most friendly of his judges seemed plainly to indicate what would be the findings. The thought of voluntarily resigning from the service had been hard. To be cashiered was almost unendurable.

Yet he walked out with his back straight and his head well up. He went directly to the White House, and sent in a written application for an interview with the President. It was refused. He went to his lodgings, and spent the remainder of the day and half the night drafting and re-drafting a concise statement of his argument against Vandervyn's contract. This he addressed to the President, and stamped for mailing. He wrote nothing with regard to his own case.

When, near morning, he at last fell asleep, he

was so near exhaustion that he did not waken until late. The hour set for the reconvening of the court-martial had already come. He sprang into his uniform with a celerity that might have reminded a fellow-officer of reveille in cadet barracks at West Point.

The worn soles of his highly polished shoes beat a tattoo on the carpetless old stairs by which he descended to the street. He did not turn to go in for a belated breakfast at the meager table of his landlady. He hastened along the few feet of narrow hall to the street door. As he drew it open, another man in uniform stepped into the doorway and confronted him. The other officer saluted. Hardy responded mechanically. For all his cool look, he was astonished. The man before him was the President's military aide.

"Captain Floyd Hardy?"

"At your service."

"You should now be in attendance upon the court-martial," stated the aide with cold severity.

"I shall explain to the court," replied Hardy.

"If not delayed, I shall be only a few —"

"You will come with me," interrupted the aide, still more severely. "Your conduct has been brought to the attention of the President. It is to be seen, sir, whether you will continue to refuse to answer the inquiries of your superiors."

Hardy went white, but his jaw set firm with grim resolution. He stepped out beside the aide, and crossed the sidewalk to the waiting motor.

As they were whirled away over the sleety asphalt, the aide sat with more than military stiffness, his head and body half averted from his companion as if to avoid contamination. Hardy sat as stiffly at the other extreme of the seat.

The ride was short. The car made a sudden turn, and curved around to the executive offices of the President. Hardy looked at his companion, perplexed. The face of the aide showed only the stern watchfulness of one who has a reputedly dangerous prisoner under arrest. At the entrance he stepped behind, as if apprehensive that Hardy might attempt to escape. A doorkeeper conducted them along a corridor into a small waiting-room. He passed into the room beyond, but reappeared in a few moments, and signed to Hardy to enter.

Hardy stepped into the room, and the door was closed behind him. The aide and the doorkeeper had remained outside. Hardy looked around with a frown of perplexity. Across the room a man sat writing at a business-like desk. There was no one else present.

The man turned in his swivel chair, and abruptly made a beckoning gesture. Hardy's hand went up in salute as he stepped forward. He was in the presence of the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy.

The President looked him up and down with a severe glance.

" You are Captain Floyd Hardy? "

" Yes, sir."

" The same who suppressed the late insurrection in the Sulus? "

" I happened to be in command at the time, sir."

" After that you obtained a detail, your conduct in discharge of which has resulted in your trial by court-martial on serious charges. I have before me the findings of the court. The circumstances are exceptional. Because of your record and of certain statements that have been presented to me, I have been persuaded to give you an opportunity to explain your conduct."

Hardy saluted. " Permit me, sir, to first present for your consideration a matter relating to the interests of the tribe which — "

" Stop! " ordered the President. " Others are waiting for interviews. I can give you only ten minutes. If you expend them on this other matter, you will have no further opportunity to state your own case."

" The evidence before the court-martial covered the facts, sir. If those facts sustain the charges against me, then I am guilty, and desire no clemency. That is all I have to say on my own case, sir. With regard to the matter which I desire to present — "

" Sit down! " ordered the President. " You have nine minutes. Be brief."

Hardy seated himself, and proceeded to pre-

sent his argument against the Vandervyn contract. He spoke deliberately, but with a conciseness that covered what he had to say fully and clearly, in words as forceful as they were few. The President listened attentively, but with no change in his expression. At the end of eight minutes Hardy stopped.

The President showed a trace of surprise. "Is that all you have to say? There is still a minute."

"That is all, sir," replied Hardy, rising.

The President touched a call button, but raised his finger. "One moment. What if I should confront you with witnesses?"

"As I have stated, sir, my only request is that all the witnesses in the case be examined."

"There are some already at hand. You shall see what they have to say about your charges."

The aide appeared, and immediately went out again at a sign from the President. He returned with Vandervyn and Marie. At sight of Hardy the young man stopped short, but, meeting the President's cordial smile, came forward with easy assurance. Marie did not look at Hardy, as she followed.

The President addressed Vandervyn: "Captain Hardy has declined to ask for clemency. I have decided to sustain the findings of the court-martial. In the face of all this, he has had the temerity to make a charge of fraud against your Indian contract."

Vandervyn nodded: "Captain Hardy is too

skilled a strategist not to realize that the best way to shield himself is to raise the cry of 'stop thief!' against others. Does he allege that the signatures to my contract are forged?"

"The signatures are genuine. They were obtained by fraud," bluntly charged Hardy.

"My word is as good or perhaps somewhat better than that of a cashiered officer," rejoined Vandervyn.

"You deny the charge," the President stated rather than inquired.

"Most emphatically," pleasantly agreed Vandervyn. He looked significantly from Hardy to Marie. "As a soldier—until recently—the gallant captain probably believes in the saying that all is fair in war and love."

Marie lowered her eyes. The President looked thoughtful. "Of course, Mr. Vandervyn, there can be no question, when it is a matter of your word against his. Yet were there any other witnesses than yourselves and the Indians?"

"Your Excellency evidently has not seen the contract," said Vandervyn. "It is duly witnessed by Charlie Redbear, the official interpreter, and by his sister."

"Ah, the interpreter, you say? This matter may be rumored in the House and even in the Senate. It will be well for you to send for the man."

Vandervyn shrugged. "Can't do it, even to oblige you, Mr. President. The fellow has gone

to the place where cold storage is unknown. My uncle told you about the affair. The fellow was drunk; he aimed his 'gun' at me. I supposed it loaded, and shot him in self-defense. Hardy was present. He can't deny what I say, without forswearing himself."

Hardy met the President's look of inquiry, and bowed in confirmation of the statement. The President again looked thoughtful. "That leaves the man's sister as the only witness to the contract. It would be well if she could be produced."

The aide left the room. Vandervyn again shrugged. "Search has been made for her, Mr. President. All that could be learned from her Indian relatives was that she had been very sick and had gone away. Of course that meant to the happy hunting-grounds. There was no other place that she could have gone."

The aide returned to the room leading a tall young woman who was dressed in a Parisian tailored suit that Vandervyn had last seen on Marie. She was gloved and heavily veiled, and she entered the room with perceptible timidity. Marie went to take her arm in a reassuring clasp and raise the veil. At no time since their coming to Washington had Vandervyn been given so much as a glimpse of Miss Dupont's reputed Hindu maid. This undoubtedly was the woman, and he looked at her with sharp curiosity as Marie raised the veil. Marie stepped aside, and gave him a full view of the girl's face.

"Oinna!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Is it not a happy surprise?" said Marie.

She smiled at the shrinking girl, and drew her about to the President. "My dear, this is the great White Father of all Indians and of our tribe — he is our father — Your Excellency, this is Mrs. Reginald Vandervyn."

The blow was given with merciless force. As Vandervyn gaped at Marie, her eyes flamed with a sudden upleaping of fierce exultance.

He gasped and choked out: "You — you! — All these months — this — you — Indian!"

"Yes, Indian — to you, even as she was Indian to you!" cried the girl. "You have been so eager to marry a 'breed girl — here is one, already your wife!"

"It's a lie — a black lie!" denied Vandervyn. "I never married her!"

"You took her by tribal custom, and you told her that you were taking her legally according to the common law."

"She cannot prove I lived with her openly as her husband," rejoined Vandervyn.

The President looked at the shrinking Oinna with kindly gravity. "Do you wish him to acknowledge you as his wife?"

"No, no, sir!" she disclaimed. "I don't want him any more."

"I am pleased to hear you say that," replied the President. He turned to Vandervyn.

"I understand this witness is prepared to testify that the signatures to your contract were obtained on the false representation that it was a second copy of the minutes of the tribal council."

"It's a lie!" hoarsely replied the young man. "Hardy knows nothing about it. There's only her word against mine."

"We can send for the Indian witnesses, if necessary. Another matter — at the inquest you testified under oath that a certain Indian killed Agent Nogen, and that you and Redbear then killed the murderer. When you shot Redbear, you rode off, certain that he was dead. He lived long enough to confess himself the murderer of Agent Nogen. Why did you perjure yourself at the inquest?"

"You can't prove it," defiantly challenged Vandervyn. "I stand by my testimony. This squaw and Hardy have hatched up the lie between them. Even if Redbear made such a confession, it is only hearsay and not legal evidence."

"Your friend Redbear seems to have enjoyed shooting at agents," remarked the President. "He also confessed to having made the two attempts on the life of Captain Hardy. In view of your perjured testimony at the Nogen inquest, one is led to infer a not improbable connection between those attempts and your enmity to Captain Hardy. But the point at present is whether you still insist upon the validity of your con-

tract. Do you wish an official investigation that will take the evidence of the Indian witnesses?"

A cold sweat was gathering on Vandervyn's forehead. He looked at Marie. She turned from him, afraid that he might misconstrue the womanly softness into which her fierce resentment had melted. He wheeled about, and left the room, sullen, unrepentant, defiant.

"A very great pity," commented the President. "Young and clever, handsome, well educated, good social standing—yet all wasted! Courage—misdirected; no sense of shame; unmoral, rather than immoral. He will ride hard to still harder falls than this one, or else to what the world calls success— But I am too busy a man to moralize. If you will pardon me, ladies, there is to be a cabinet meeting."

He bowed to them, and then confronted Hardy, once more the Commander in Chief. "Sir, I warned you that if you did not speak in your own defense, you would have no other opportunity. I shall not reverse my approval of the findings of the court-martial."

Hardy had stood an amazed and dumfounded spectator to the rejection and disgrace of his rival. But throughout it all Marie had never once looked at him. If her scornful casting off of Vandervyn had roused any hopes for himself, they must have been dashed when she led Oinna away without favoring him with so much as a glance of recognition. There was a slight

stoop in his shoulders as he saluted the President.

"If the sentence approved by Your Excellency does not make association with me scandalous," he said, "I beg leave to express my thanks for the intimation that you will invalidate the fraudulent contract."

Without replying, the President abruptly faced about to his desk. Hardy again saluted, and marched from the room as if on dress parade.

CHAPTER XXX

THE SENTENCE

IN the anteroom the doorkeeper waved Hardy to a door on the right. It led him into a stenographers' room. He saw the flounce of a woman's skirt behind a revolving bookcase near the far end of the room, and paused. Some one stepped into the room after him, and touched him authoritatively on the shoulder.

"One moment, Captain Hardy — your sentence."

He turned, and faced the President's aide with the clear, unflinching gaze of a brave man about to be shot. The aide saluted with punctilious formality. Hardy responded with equal formality. The aide presented an official document, saluted, and withdrew from the room.

For a long moment Hardy stood with the decree of his fate slowly crumpling in his hand. His eyes were fixed on vacancy. Doubtless he was seeing the years of soldierly comradeship and duty that now lay in the past and the vision of the career to which he was to have given the utmost of his powers. He had always loved his profession — And now —

The woman whose skirt he had seen was in front of him before he became aware of her presence. He found himself looking into the cool half-mocking face of Marie.

"Are you afraid to read your sentence?" she taunted. "Had it not been for you, *he* would have had the mine and a million from his contract and *me*. The President conferred with Senator Clemmer an hour ago. The treaty appropriation bill will be passed with a clause that no commission is to be paid for the services of any tribal agent or representative. *He* has lost everything. And now — I am waiting to see you read that paper."

Hardy drew himself up, opened the envelope, took out the document, and read.

As Marie saw the look of blank incredulity that came into his face, her eyes flashed under the lowering veil of their long lashes. He stared up at her, but was too dazed to perceive the change in her expression.

"Acquitted — honorably — on all charges!" he murmured. "On all charges —! Honorable mention recommended — Approved — the President!"

Marie smiled with cool condescension.

"Merely a question of doing justice to you, Captain Hardy. When a man has done his duty, however harshly, it is the duty of others to see that he receives just compensation. I take credit for having helped to bring this about."

"You?" he exclaimed. "Of course, though, if you really did not love him —"

"That does not follow. You must know I did love him. But to find that I had for rival another 'breed girl—one not half so beautiful as I—I could not endure the thought. You have seen the proof that there is a good deal of my mother's red grandfather in my blood. No, I had to give him up, and I have decided to marry another man."

"Another!" echoed Hardy.

"Will you not congratulate me?" she asked.

He rallied. "I congratulate *him*. After what has happened, I feel confident that you must have chosen some one more worthy of you."

"He is!" declared the girl, her glorious eyes melting with tenderness. "He is far more worthy of me than I am of him!"

With an effort she recovered her cool composure.

"But now, before going, I wish to take this opportunity to discharge in a way the obligation that, as a member of the tribe, I owe to you for your services. I shall therefore return the mine to you."

She held out a document. He stepped back.

"No, Miss Dupont," he said. "I cannot accept it."

"You must. I took it from you. Though I have used the income from it not altogether for personal gratification, you must realize that my

pride will not permit me to keep it any longer. Let me add that it has not pinched out, as you may have inferred from what I said at the ball. It is a bonanza."

"I regret that I cannot accept it," he replied. "A captain's pay is quite sufficient for a — bachelor."

Marie gave him a mocking glance. "Really now, Captain Hardy, you do not expect me to believe you will long remain unmarried?"

He tried his best to conceal how her frivolity tortured him. "You may not believe it, Miss Dupont. Yet it is true."

"It is not," she contradicted. "When we were abroad, *Père* and I went to Monte Carlo. I fancy the gambling spirit infected me. Let us settle the ownership of the mine with a wager. If you do not marry this year, I agree to keep it. But if you marry within that time, you will accept it back from me on your wedding day."

"It is not fair for me to bet on a certainty; but if you insist, I agree to the wager," said Hardy.

"Then be prepared to take the mine a week from today," she bantered.

He tore his gaze away from the lovely face whose gay smile appeared so heartlessly mocking.

"You — cannot realize — how this —"

She handed him another sealed envelope.

"Here is the order detailing you to special service with the General Staff for the winter.

You will then be required to return to the Reservation and carry out all the plans recommended by you for the civilizing of the tribe. Your mare is in the same stable as the thoroughbred that I have bought to use as her riding mate."

The changed tone in the girl's voice compelled Hardy to look up. In her radiant eyes he saw a look that could not be mistaken. The smile that had seemed so mocking was now tenderly teasing.

"Marie — you — " he stammered. "Are you certain it is — love — not a passing feeling of pity?"

"Pity! For you?" she cried. "Do you think I could dare to pity *you*? — a man like you! I could not have been so presumptuous even had those treacherous conspirators succeeded in crushing you. Do you think it was pity that made me live a lie all this time — that forced me to flout you and accept his detestable attentions?"

Her voice sank to a note of deep humility.

"I know how very unworthy of you I am. Yet I hope I am not so unworthy as that first day at the coulée, when I scorned you, and you, with your skill and courage and moderation, saved us without harming those whose attack he had wantonly brought upon us. I was a coquette — a coquette infatuated with the kind of man with whom a coquette deserves to be infatuated. But I was not altogether frivolous. I soon perceived your immeasurable superiority over him.

Only my head could not overcome the fascination that had bound my heart. My soul sought to free itself from the spell—I struggled and prayed— Yet not until there at the mine, when you showed yourself the bravest, the most generous — ”

She flung out her arms to him in piteous appeal. “ Captain! *My* captain! Say that you do not think me — altogether what he — thought me! ”

Hardy drew her hands together, and bent to kiss them with reverent passion.

“ Dearest,” he replied, “ you forget that other day in the coulée — that day when you thought me dying. I gazed up into your eyes, and I saw the look of my mother.”

THE END